

“The Impact of Standardized Music Tests on Young Musicians”

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Introduction

While standardized tests in music aren't common in America, they are central in other nations' education systems. Countries such as Cuba, China and Taiwan see standardized testing as motivating to students and help teachers provide a high-quality education. However, they also have a negative connotation due to the idea that they don't allow freedom in the learning process. Differing learning approaches affect students' long-term decisions and pursuit of a lifelong relationship with music. Some teachers prefer to teach with a grade (performance) orientation while others like to teach with a learning (mastery) orientation. Based on these two opposing viewpoints, I examine how musical standardized testing affects musicians who are pursuing a career in music. Within this research, I have bound musical standardized tests to mean structured curriculum that leads into yearly or quarterly tests that examine the knowledge obtained by a music student. Based on five interviews with a combination of professors and students, these tests successfully prepare students for studying music at the collegiate level by giving a solid musical foundation from a well-developed curriculum.

For the purpose of this paper I will be examining the standardized curriculum and how it is used in a private lesson setting within a music studio/school rather than standard music classes offered in public schools. In this scenario, do musical standardized tests foster a motivated, dedicated musician? What music and cultural values do these tests promote? Using music education literature and qualitative interviews, I show the advantages and disadvantages of adopting these tests for young musicians who plan to pursue a career in music performance. I examine how these tests affect students mentally as they perform under high pressure testing and performances at a young age. While these tests may limit the student's agency in choosing

repertoire, they prepare students for the reality of a career in music as they are always working towards a performance.

History of Programs that Include Standardized Musical Tests

Standardized music tests are often used in music institutions and conservatories around the world. Conservatories have been a major part of large cities for many years. The Toronto Conservatory of Music was founded in 1876 and became branded as The Royal Conservatory of Music in 1947.¹ Since then they have developed a curriculum for multiple instruments. Their curriculum is recognized “as credit toward secondary school graduation in many Canadian schools, as well as being an important element in entrance requirements for college and university music programs.”² Their program is meant to be comprehensive with elements including repertoire, etudes/studies, sight-reading, ear training, technique and theory.³

Music study in Cuba is very competitive with a vigorous examination system for each instrument. As all education is funded by the government, one of the most popular places to study music is the National School of Arts (ENA) which was founded in 1962.⁴ At this school, students must take a music aptitude test for entrance into the school with a limited number of spots available for each instrument. Physical structure of students also plays a large part in the

¹ “Program Overview. The Royal Conservatory Certificate Program.” The Royal Conservatory of Music, 2019 <https://www.rcmusic.com/learning/about-the-royal-conservatory-certificate-program/program-overview#BenefitsofTheRoyalConservatoryCertificatePro-5>

² “Program Overview. The Royal Conservatory Certificate Program.” The Royal Conservatory of Music, 2019 <https://www.rcmusic.com/learning/about-the-royal-conservatory-certificate-program/program-overview#BenefitsofTheRoyalConservatoryCertificatePro-5>

³ Ibid.

⁴ “National School of Arts: Leading Center of Artistic Teaching in Cuba” Havana Music, accessed on November 15, 2019, <https://havanamusicsschool.com/national-school-of-art-leading-center-of-artistic-teaching-in-cuba/>

instrument selection process.⁵ One of the students I interviewed who is pursuing a music career explained how she was denied playing bassoon because her fingers weren't the proper length.⁶

In China there are many standardized testing systems for young musicians to participate in. For this study, I discuss the leveling system included in the books that derive from the Central China Conservatory of Music which was established in 1950.⁷ I have decided to focus on this series as it is the curriculum that one of the students I interviewed used in China. The CCCM provides a series of books leveled for students to complete an examination through level 10. Studying at the main conservatory can include primary level to postgraduate programs.⁸

For students in America who want to pursue a career in music, there are programs offered in large cities that they can enroll in which include standardized testing for collegiate preparation. For instance, Colburn Music Conservatory, located in Los Angeles, began as a piano preparatory program in 1950 and quickly expanded into other instruments and many levels of performing.⁹ They now help students prepare for college and begin their musical careers. Based off an interview with a student who went to Colburn for 9 years, they enable students by offering a wide variety of lessons and genres as well as experience with chamber groups.¹⁰ Although this program exists in LA, there are smaller, less affluent cities that do not provide their communities with a program like Colburn. Therefore, many American musicians who are

⁵ Ana Trujillo, interview by author, Denver, October 9, 2019.

⁶ Ana Trujillo, interview by author, Denver, October 9, 2019.

⁷ "History of CCOM", About CCOM, Accessed on November 15, 2019,

<http://en.ccom.edu.cn/aboutccom/hoc/200803240013.shtml>

⁸ "Programs", About CCOM, Accessed on November 15, 2019,

<http://en.ccom.edu.cn/aboutccom/programs/index.shtml>

⁹ "Mission and History," About Colburn, Colburn, access on November 15, 2019.

<https://www.colburnschool.edu/about-colburn/mission-and-history/>

¹⁰ William Calix, interview by author, Denver, October 31, 2019.

pursuing a career in music do not participate in standardized musical tests as they are not commonly used in a private lesson setting.

Different Approach with Various Impacts

Playing and learning music is known to increase brain activity while engaging in a skill that teaches lifelong coordination. However, how one experiences music at a young age often affects their long-term decisions, including pursuit of a lifelong interest in music. There are two learning approaches to be discussed when considering how children learn: “a grade (or performance) orientation and a learning (or mastery) orientation.”¹¹ In the grade orientation, students are more exam based and determined to win a competition or to achieve a certain status in their education. This approach emphasizes the successes in a student's performance and highlights competition. However, the learning orientation focuses on the improvements that have been made within each student rather than meeting a definitive standard. According to music educator, Susan Green, psychologists have shown that students who approach learning with the learning orientation are more willing to try different tasks, persist longer with difficult problems and have a more positive attitude about music in general.¹² Even though these two approaches are commonly thought of as one style or the other, I believe music is meant to be approached with a mix of both orientations.

As stated by Green, both perspectives can include positive outcomes for students, especially when they are used in partnership. For instance, striving for playing with a high-quality band/orchestra and enjoying the pursuit of practicing and improving everyday will give

¹¹ Susan K Green, “Fostering a Lifelong Love of Music: Instruction and Assessment Practices that Make a Difference,” *Music Education Journal* (September 2011).

¹² Susan K Green, “Fostering a Lifelong Love of Music: Instruction and Assessment Practices that Make a Difference,” *Music Education Journal* (September 2011).

students an attainable goal while still realizing their self-improvement. This combination of learning will promote a lifelong pursuit of music as they enjoy the process and outcome of learning. Teachers play a large part in engaging students and pushing them to the next level. Giving students meaningful tasks can help promote practice throughout the week so they don't feel like they are aimlessly practicing. This approach to music will encourage a lifelong musician because they will always find purpose and value in music education.

Mental Impact of Standardized Tests

Standardized testing frequently has a negative connotation as people commonly believe it limits students' learning desires and needs. Many people also believe that teachers can't perform best when they are given certain formats to follow. With this being the case, it is hard to find literature that shows positive affects of standardized tests. However, Richard Phelps explains a few of the reasons that literature reviews are scarce on the positive impacts of standardized testing in his book titled *Defending Standardized Testing*. In this book he explains his belief that those who have claimed to search for benefits of testing have simply not looked hard enough to find them because these ideas are often not found in mainstream journals.¹³ He continues to report that in his findings, many studies showed negative results of standardized testing simply because the test "induced a change in curriculum and instruction, a change some teachers, administrators, or the researchers themselves did not like...A closer look at the study results... observed students working harder and learning more as a result of the test."¹⁴ While these test results may show an increase in testing scores and a harder work ethic, it does not reveal the mental stress that students are required to endure in preparation for large tests.

¹³ Richard Phelps. *Defending Standardized Testing*. (Mahwah, N.J.: Psychology Press, 2005), 60-61.

¹⁴ Ibid, 58.

Standardized exams in a school setting and in standardized music curriculum both require many hours of preparation. In the music realm, these hours are frequently spent practicing alone. This might make one believe that a musician preparing for exams could feel isolated and anxious for a large test. However, out of the five musicians I interviewed who participated in standardized music tests, none of them claimed to feel overwhelmed when preparing for examinations. Each of them stated that the tests were a great motivational tool to practice throughout the year, and eventually it became simply a part of their music education rather than something to stress over. Due to these interviews, one can presume that musical standardized tests may be challenging for students learning music. However, many students will accept this challenge. By preparing for a comprehensive exam, students are given the opportunity to understand the challenges of a music career as the preparation is like many professional musicians who prepare for a large performance.

Standardized tests may reveal scores about a group of students, but do not necessarily represent an individual. In the book titled, “The Effects of Standardized Testing,” the authors discuss a study completed in 1969 where Torshen hypothesized that the grades teachers gave students had a strong, direct impact on them while standardized achievement tests did not have as much of a direct influence on them.¹⁵ The hypothesis was proven correct as students did not feel directly impacted by standardized tests, especially when the scores contradicted other information about their education.¹⁶ Even though students in the public-school system may not have felt impacted by standardized tests, musical exams often directly impact a student. This

¹⁵ Thomas Kelleghan, *The Effects of Standardized Testing*, (Kluwer Nijhoff Publishing, 1982), 17.

¹⁶ Ibid.

direct impact seems like it would affect a young musician's life in a stressful manner, but many of the professional musicians I interviewed stated otherwise.

In an interview held with professor Chee-Hwa Tan from the University of Denver, she shared her testing experience in Taiwan, which included the Royal Conservatory of Music curriculum. She explained the importance of passing the exam each year because during her years of study there was only one opportunity to complete the examination for each level.¹⁷ Therefore, if a student didn't pass then they would have to wait an entire year to attempt to pass either the same level or try to jump forward to the next level. While this may seem like it puts a lot of stress on students, she believes it encouraged her to work harder every year leading up to the exam rather than getting stuck on the importance of the exam each year.¹⁸ Preparing for a large examination may require a lot of studious effort and devotion to an instrument, but I believe it is important for students to understand that this devotion directly correlates with the devotion they will have to give to their instrument while pursuing a music career.

Western Music in Standardized Curriculum

Western music is commonly referred to as the most "prestigious" form of music. According to Juliet Hess, who studies music education available in Japan and Korea, many Asian pianists are encouraged to study music abroad because of the common idea that anything Western is better.¹⁹ Although Western Classical music has a heavy emphasis on music learned today it is not the only music used in standardized curriculum. When considering musical standardized testing, people often believe that it limits students' repertoire and doesn't encourage

¹⁷ Chee-Hwa, interview by author, Denver, October 15, 2019.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Juliet Hess. "Decolonizing Music Education: Moving Beyond Tokenism" *International Journal of Music Education* 33, no. 3 (August 2015) 2.

a large variety of music. In interviews conducted with musicians from Cuba, China, Taiwan, Canada and America they explain their experience of the repertoire used in standardized testing. Along with appreciating exposure to different genres of music, the interviewees were grateful for exposure to the lengthy list of repertoire offered for each level of testing. This variety never made them feel limited as musicians.

Based on a conversation with a student who is from China and is currently studying in America, the music used in standardized curriculum in China is not limited to classical music and instead also includes traditional Chinese music.²⁰ In her opinion, the curriculum provided by the Central China Conservatory of Music did not place an extreme emphasis on Western music. All the music that was in the curriculum was classified as either foreign or Chinese music.²¹ The foreign music included pieces from America or European countries, but emphasis was placed on Chinese cultural music as well and was given as an option to play in the standardized testing.²² In another interview conducted with a student who studied in Cuba for 5 years she explained how musical tests were given regularly like her other core subjects, and large examinations took place once a level is complete. During her preparation for each level of exams, she had exposure to Cuban and Classical music and appreciated her experience in these two different genres because the pieces were sequential and made sense for learners.²³ The Cuban music she studied also included a jazz influence because many of the Cuban cultural music had a Latin Jazz influence.²⁴

²⁰ Yinglin Wang, interview by author, Denver, October 7, 2019.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Yinglin Wang, interview by author, Denver, October 7, 2019.

²³ Ana Trujillo, interview by author, Denver, October 9, 2019.

²⁴ Ana Trujillo, interview by author, Denver, October 9, 2019.

Another student who studied at Colburn School of the Performing Arts in LA recalled being able to choose about half of his repertoire.²⁵ While he couldn't choose all his pieces, his teacher gave him multiple options to select his repertoire from so he could then choose his favorite piece to learn.²⁶ This allowed for freedom in the selection process of pieces. Although this school is more classical focused, they also taught jazz and pop music. However, based on his experience, there wasn't exposure to other genres or cultural music from other nations during his time at this school.²⁷ The limited exposure to music outside of the classical culture was also discussed with two musicians who studied through the Royal Conservatory of Music curriculum. One studied in Taiwan and another studied in Canada. They both had positive reviews on the curriculum, but each shared that there wasn't an overwhelming amount of music from other cultures.²⁸

Based on the interviews, other countries such as China and Cuba might be doing a better job of exposing their students to different genres and various cultures rather than placing such an emphasis on traditional western music. However, many music institutions in the US place a high priority on classically trained musicians and require their students to study western music. So, in this regard, following a standardized curriculum in the US could potentially benefit a musician looking to pursue a music career by previously being exposed to the standard western repertoire.

²⁵ William Calix, interview by author, Denver, October 31, 2019.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Chee-Hwa Tan, interview by author, Denver, October 15, 2019 and Vincent Yang, interview by author, Denver, November 4, 2019.

Performance Preparation

In music institutions, students are required to show their musical knowledge through juries. While each school has a different approach to these examinations and require different elements, they all result in students moving either forward or being temporarily held from progressing to the next level of their music studies. Being tested in an environment where a performance dictates the next step in music is similar to the experience offered in standardized curriculum exams. Therefore, one might assume that many years of standardized music exams would prepare students for collegiate level juries. However, this was not the case with each of the musicians I interviewed. Three of the five musicians believed that preparation for exams were beneficial, but the exam itself did not help in preparing for musical testing at the collegiate level. This was because the exams given as a child were often in a friendly environment that didn't make them nervous or were only offered once a year, so it wasn't enough to prepare for performance situations. Therefore, one can conclude that standardized music tests are not beneficial in preparing students for performances. However, many of the programs that offer standardized curriculum also provide additional performance opportunities for their students such as studio and community recitals.

Conclusion

There are many positive and negative impacts to participating in a standardized curriculum. Engaging in a well-tested and sequenced program of study will benefit students pursuing a music career due to the solid foundation provided in a properly structured curriculum. Involvement in such education encourages a sequential and well thought out introduction of concepts followed by application-based tasks that allow students to display what they have learned to not only themselves, but to a board of judges. This process is similar to the life of a

professional musician as they are constantly learning new music and testing their musical abilities with an audience. While this process may place additional stress on students at a young age, I believe it gives them an incredible amount of motivation to learn music and properly prepares those who are striving to have a career in music.

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