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Band, Orchestra, and... What?: Alternative Instrumental Ensembles in the United States

David R Thompson

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Abstract

Traditional ensemble music education has historically been dominated by “the big three:” band, orchestra, and choir. Demographic shifts in student populations as well as long-time calls for expanded curricular offerings have led to the creation of alternative instrumental ensembles in schools. This review of literature will address the following questions: 1) What is an alternative instrumental ensemble? 2) What role(s) do alternative ensembles play in the larger school music program? and 3) What types of alternative ensembles exist currently? Alternative drum and percussion, guitar, marching band, mariachi, steel pan, string, and technology ensembles have been profiled in the literature. Further research is needed to determine how school demographic factors influence the inclusion of alternative ensembles, the role of teacher education, how the ensembles are formed, if regional trends exist, and what funding models are in place for the ensembles moving forward.

Introduction and Research Questions

A tension exists between supporters of traditional large ensemble music education and those committed to curricular reform. On one hand, traditionalists fear that attacks from both outside and within the profession may weaken their programs. On the other hand, reformers fear that without immediate action, music education may be eliminated from schools altogether. According to the traditionalists, the American large ensemble is a point of pride worth preserving. According to the reformers, the American large ensemble may be doing more harm than good. This tension has generated a spirited, if even sometimes vitriolic debate.

In a plea to avoid “throwing the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to curricular reform (p. 49),” Miksza (2013), encouraged readers to consider the value that traditional ensembles have in students’ lives. Many music educators remember their own experiences with large ensembles fondly. Current students also seem to enjoy large ensemble participation. Change, according to Miksza, cannot be made at the expense of all that is working in music education. Fonder (2014), a collegiate band director and ardent supporter of traditional ensembles, described some supporters of reform as the “Ann Coulters of the music education world (p. 89),” perhaps because Fonder feels that reformers are causing controversy for controversy’s sake. The author continues, “The business of music education does not need gadflies, however, who distort what is working well in order to build upon whatever needs improving (p. 89).” With those harsh words, many in the reform camp took notice. Their replies, specifically to Fonder, demonstrate the degree of division between both groups.

Articles by Williams (2011a) and Kratus (2007) may have been the inspiration for Fonder’s words. Both authors believed they were, as they indicated in separate response letters. In *Music Education at the Tipping Point*, Kratus (2007) described a scenario where ensembles cease to exist not through a gradual decay, but in a rapid transformation, similar to the abandonment of Latin instruction in schools only a few generations earlier. Kratus (2015) wrote to challenge the very musicianship of traditionalist conductors who perform by “waving a baton (p. 8).” In Kratus’ words, both he and Williams perform regularly in concerts and recitals, calling into question Fonder’s assumption that reformers use their publications as performance. Williams (2015), in a more diplomatic tact, highlighted the value of traditional ensembles while also reinforcing the needs for reform. He believed that large ensembles fulfill an important role, but they must be augmented with other offerings.

Colley (2009) described the band, orchestra, and choir based model as the “trilogy” of traditional music education. Band, particularly, claims a uniquely large role among the three. This tension between band as the dominant instrumental paradigm and all other possibilities in music education is what Mantie (2012) described as the antimony between music education and band-as-music education. One need only look at hiring practices in higher education, Mantie argued, where certain positions are posted as *music education* and others as *Director of Bands*. The author summarized the antimony and gave some insight, if somewhat over-generalized, into mindset of both groups of faculty by writing, “for the Director of Bands, bands are a (or even *the*) medium of music education; for the professor of Music Education, bands are a medium for music education (p. 76).”

Curricular expansion, according to the reformers, is urgent. Beyond Kratus’ (2007) concerns, Schuler (2011) identified changing student demographics as an additional area of concern. Access to private lessons, which the author stated can influence achievement in instrumental courses, may be limited among low-socioeconomic or minority groups. Expanding the curriculum beyond traditional ensemble offerings may be a way to reach those students. Furthermore, the development of lifelong music making skills should be a priority in music education, something Schuler believes may be improved through curricular expansion.

Regardless of the specific new direction, curricular changes can generate new issues for educators. Presenting and performing music in authentic ways is one such concern. According to Woody (2007), many music educators understand the importance of authenticity when working with music from other cultures. However, when students' own cultural identities are intertwined with the musical material used in class, issues of authenticity become even more important. Inattention to certain pedagogical or performance concerns could be interpreted individually by a student as ignorance at best, or more perniciously as a deliberate slight from that student’s teacher.

Reaching a middle ground between the two divisive positions of tradition and reform may not be as difficult as either side’s tenor suggests. One possibility that features elements of both tradition and reform is alternative ensembles. Mixon (2009) described performing groups that use both traditional and non-traditional instruments in the instrumental context. According to Mixon, any ensemble that falls out of traditional performance standards is a *non-traditional ensemble*. Those ensembles that feature instrumentation similar to traditional groups, but are non-traditional in nature, are *specialized ensembles*. Alternative ensembles, according to Mixon, are those that are both non-traditional and that use unique instrumentation, such as a world drum ensemble.

Mixon’s (2009) schema is problematic, however. Rideout (2005) asked readers to consider the role of tradition, power, and student agency by asking “whose music” is the focus of study? Terming certain ensembles as *non-traditional*, especially given Woody’s (2007) call to consider student background, while calling others traditional makes a very powerful statement about “whose music” is being, or ought to be, taught. Colley (2009) used the term *alternative ensemble* to describe any instrumental group that lies outside of the traditional band, orchestra, and choir trilogy. In an effort to help create an even stronger middle ground between traditionalists and reformers, Colley suggested the term *additional ensembles*. *Alternative*, the author believed, could imply replacement or removal of traditional ensembles. *Additional*, may have a more egalitarian tone, but it has yet to be accepted for widespread use in the profession and literature.

Presently, both non-traditional and alternative ensemble are used by various authors to mean any group that falls outside the traditional trilogy. Given the cultural and sociological implications of the term non-traditional, this review of literature will use the term alternative ensemble.

Traditionalists and reformers both are rightly concerned about the future of music education. While each believe in their own path forward, a middle ground approach shows promise. Alternative ensembles that combine the best of the performing tradition in instrumental education with new approaches should be investigated. The purpose of this review of literature is to clarify the current state of alternative ensembles by investigating the following questions: 1) What is an alternative instrumental ensemble? 2) What role(s) do alternative ensembles play in the larger school music program? and 3) What types of alternative ensembles exist currently?

Methodology

An initial reading of literature related to alternative ensembles included Colley (2009) and Mixon (2009). It was determined that the majority of citations from both authors came from peer-reviewed publications in music education and used similar terminology when referring to the topic of alternative ensembles. Therefore, a two-stage electronic keyword search methodology was used for this review of literature. The purpose of the first stage was to generate a list of ensemble types, or keywords, for the second stage search, which identified literature that addressed the research questions.

Keywords for the first-stage were identified from Colley (2009) and Mixon (2009) as *alternative*, *ensemble*, *multi-cultural*, *non-traditional*, and *world*. Those keywords and their permutations, for example *traditional*, *nontraditional*, and *non-traditional*, were entered into Education Research Complete (ERC), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale (RILM), and JSTOR. These databases were chosen as they feature indexes of many peer-review journals in music education. A manual search of *Visions of Research in Music Education*, published by the New Jersey Music Educators Association, was also conducted due to a special edition titled “New Directions in Music Education,” and because this journal is not indexed by the databases used for this study.

The first stage yielded a list of ensemble types that were used as keywords for the second-stage. The ensemble types identified through this process were *drum/percussion*, *guitar*, *marching band*, *mariachi*, *steel pan*, *string*, and *technology*. In a similar process to the first-stage, these ensemble keywords were entered, along with permutations, into the databases listed above. The literature identified through this second-stage will reported in the results below.

Results and Discussion

A promising variety of alternative ensemble types are mentioned in the literature. Drum or percussion (Hess, 2013; Powell 2003), guitar (Cape, 2013; Crump, Gordon, & Kimbrough, 2012; Russell 2010), marching band (Garofalo, 2011), mariachi (Clark, 2005), steel pan (Tanner, 2010; Williams, 2008), string (Oare, 2008), and technology based (Kuzmich, 2013) were mentioned as occurring in the U.S. K-12 public school context or occurring in related contexts. This list does not represent every alternative ensemble type present in schools, as it is likely that many more alternative ensembles exist than have been written about in peer-reviewed articles, research studies, and dissertations. Neither can this list stand for all time. As new needs generate

new offerings, music educators will expand their programs. Future lists will include some new ensembles, while some may fall out of favor.

Drum and percussion ensembles may be categorized, using Mixon's (2009) terms as either specialized, by using "traditional" instrumentation, or alternative, by using "non-traditional" instrumentation. Hess (2013) described an alternative drum ensemble at the elementary level called the Sankofa Drum & Dance Ensemble. Based on Ghanaian music and the author's own experiences in Ghana, the ensemble addressed both musical performance and cultural issues. Apart from performance considerations, Hess believed that the ensemble had the ability to "disrupt the stereotypes and preconceived notions that the students may have had about both Africa in general and Ghana in particular (p. 8)." This type of cultural learning represents a major justification of alternative ensembles in schools. A band or orchestra may play a piece inspired by a folk song, but alternative ensembles can present a much more authentic experience of performing world music through differences in instrumentation and pedagogy. Another alternative drum ensemble, San Jose Taiko, has its cultural origins in Japan. Powell (2003) conducted an ethnographic dissertation of the professional ensemble which performs regularly in schools and the community. As an ensemble with specific cultural roots, the group serves the role of ambassador as it travels to perform in different contexts. All world or culturally based alternative ensembles could provide this same benefit to their own school communities. The researcher listed among the implications for music education theory and practice that alternative ensembles, and taiko specifically, can broaden the pedagogical approach beyond what is typically seen in trilogy ensembles. For example, taiko requires the performer to gain embodied knowledge in "multiple modes of knowing" including "different types of drums, cymbals, percussion instruments, voice, and multi-ethnic instruments" that "require a tactile, aesthetic understanding of the ways in which the body coordinates with the instrument (p. 300)."

For a guitar course to be considered an alternative ensemble as defined in this study, it must be primarily performance based. Therefore, *class guitar* type courses, where students engage in what could be considered a group lesson format are not included. Some of the students Cape (2013) interviewed for a qualitative study on the meaningfulness of a high school guitar ensemble felt that this type of course allowed for a different kind of experience than traditional study. Even the group's director, a self-described "product" of a traditional band, shared a similar sentiment about this alternative ensemble.

I don't think they want to sit in band and have to be quiet and listen to the whole section, you know? I loved playing in band and, I mean, the feeling you get from a band performance with the sonorities and that whole thing, you won't get that here. But what you get is on a different level. You get this bond in your soul...I don't know what it is. It's different (p. 15).

Perhaps what the director is trying to articulate is an understanding that alternative ensembles may resemble traditional groups on the surface, but play very different roles in students' lives and experiences. It is also worth noting how the director does not make a value judgment between traditional band and alternative guitar ensembles. One is not better than the other, simply different.

Crump et al. (2012) conducted a study of guitar chord visualization and concluded that guitarists interpret chords in a multimodal fashion. Further research is needed to determine what implications findings like this and others have for guitar instruction in the alternative ensemble.

Assessment of individual guitar performance was the subject of research by Russell (2010). Interpretation/musical effect, technique, rhythm/tempo, tone, and intonation were identified as being the primary factors that influenced aural performance assessment on guitar. These studies, and future research, will both assist guitar ensemble teachers and could serve as a model for the type of research needed for other types of alternative ensembles.

Marching band was not specifically mentioned by Colley (2009) as a part of the band, orchestra, and choir trilogy, but it represents a group of ensemble types that many would consider a part of traditional music education in the United States. Garofalo (2011), however, described a type of marching band that has alternative features. HONK! ensembles use traditional marching band instrumentation to create street festival-type performances in the style of a New Orleans parade band. Festival performances are currently comprised of professional or community groups, but as the author suggests, this ensemble type could be readily introduced into the school music program. The groups often encourage audience participation through dance or musical means such as call and response. Aural learning, improvisation, and composition are used frequently in preparing for performance, which may also include elements of political protest or a social justice agenda. HONK! is an example of how widely pedagogy can vary across the school music program even while instrumentation remains similar. Instead of emphasizing notation reading, these groups utilize a collaborative aural approach to composition.

Schuler (2011) identified changing student demographics as a reason to expand the curriculum in music education. With a growing Hispanic population, both nationally and in specific regions of the United States, Clark (2005) recognized mariachi as a possible alternative ensemble. With origins in Mexico in the late nineteenth century, mariachi can be considered the “musical icon of Mexican nationalism (p. 227).” Instrumentation initially consisted of string instruments. Trumpet and vocals were added in the twentieth century. Around the same time, attitudes toward the participation of women in Mexican society were changing, and what was once an exclusively male ensemble became open to all. As an alternative ensemble in schools, mariachi utilizes instruments outside the trilogy, affords cultural learning opportunities, and could create opportunities for school-community collaborations by identifying local mariachi musicians. Abril (2009) conducted a case study of a non-Hispanic instrumental teacher in Chicago. In an effort to respond to include more of her students’ backgrounds, a teacher with the pseudonym Nancy initiated a mariachi program. Despite the status of “cultural outsider,” the researcher found that Nancy “opened increasingly wider spaces for students to engage in dialogues about music and culture, she began to see herself as much a learner as a teacher (p. 89).” Abril concluded that belonging to a particular culture or national origin is not a requirement to be engaged as a student or teacher this type of alternative ensemble. More research is needed to identify the demographics of music educators and how those demographic patterns influence the likelihood of teaching an alternative ensemble.

Steel pan bands, steel drum bands, steel bands, or simply, pan are an alternative ensemble that is already enjoying relatively wide success. Williams (2008) describes steel drum bands as originating in Trinidad and Tobago during the World War II period. Contrary to popular belief, prototypes of the instrument made of metal tubs and dustbins existed before the U.S. navy discarded oil drums that later washed ashore. When those oil drums did arrive, however, it launched a rapid period of growth where the instrument, ensemble types, and repertoire eventually made their way into school music settings. Williams identified steel pan bands as being both culturally authentic and also a “school” ensemble. Music educators must take care

when importing an alternative ensemble to the school context, as any change could threaten authenticity. Fortunately for alternative ensemble educators, many resources exist to help with this transition. These include manufacturers who produce quality instruments and music publishers who feature and promote composers that write in an authentic style. Tanner (2010) suggested that supporting the writing of new music for steel bands could be an important step in furthering the acceptance of this alternative ensemble. The author also included a list of prominent composers who produce “quality” or authentic music for the ensemble.

Like marching band and HONK! string ensembles have the potential to be both traditional and alternative. Oare (2008) conducted a case study on the Chelsea House Orchestra, a Celtic string ensemble from Chelsea, Michigan. Founded in 1996 with ten students, the ensemble has grown substantially and has performed nationally and internationally. The group, and its founder, strive to produce authentic performances that also meet the needs of students. Oare admitted “completely authentic replications of world music may not be possible with traditional public school performance groups because of variations in instrumentation, cultural knowledge, and the skill of the students (p. 73).” This is just one perspective on the balance between perfect authenticity and feasibility in the school context. Other alternative ensemble educators can arrive at different conclusions, and it is likely that specific school contexts change that answer. More research into the specific contexts of alternative ensembles could help clarify best practices for music educators. Perhaps due in part to the existence of the Chelsea House Orchestra, the school has very large enrolment in traditional orchestra courses. This may indicate that alternative ensembles contribute to, rather than detract from traditional offerings. The fear of *replacement*, where an alternative ensemble overtakes the traditional offerings, motivates some concern among traditionalists in music education. The Chelsea House Orchestra is an example of an alternative ensemble that, along with the traditional offerings, may be more than the sum of their parts.

Advances in technology are influencing how music educators teach and make music with their students. Cost continues to decrease while functionality improves, a very good sign for music educators hoping to integrate technology or to make technology the focus of an alternative ensemble. Kuzmich (2013) described the music technology program at Greenwich, Connecticut taught by Barbara Freedman. Students in this school can enroll in a typical music technology course that addresses computer music making. What makes Greenwich unique, however, is that students are also required to perform with one another in a live setting. Freedman, speaking about the importance of performance with technology, stated that

I want students to experience composition. And they usually do all their own they work [sic] on a computer. But then the ensemble experience gives them a chance to work with people ‘live.’ In a live situation they can’t go back and quantize (have the computer correct timing). I want them to explore sounds and sound design and I would like them to improvise because these hand-helds are a wonderful way to explore music by improvisation (p. 23).

Williams (2011b) described the “non-traditional music student” as someone who does not or cannot find success in traditional ensembles. Through the use of technology, though, music educators could create opportunities to engage these students. Expanding opportunities through alternative ensembles means reaching new students, not just offering new experiences to traditional students. Williams described work in this area as “helping to bring recognition to a

new population of secondary school music students in the United States, that, through stat-of-the-art music technology tools may be challenged to move from the ‘non-participant’ characterization of music student to the ‘participant’. (p. 145)” New alternative ensembles could be formed as the cost of technology decreases while its capabilities increases.

Conclusions and Future Research

This study sought to investigate alternative instrumental ensembles as the middle ground between tradition and reform. The divisiveness between traditionalists and reformers could grow to threaten the profession, which would almost certainly benefit from cooperation over controversy. The advantage of alternative ensembles in the role of cooperation is that they preserve a traditional performance emphasis while expanding the curriculum to include new music, instrumentation, and cultures. The goal of the first research question was to define alternative ensembles. Mixon (2009) devised the most ambitious schema, using the term non-traditional to describe all *alternative ensembles*. The author further separated ensembles based on their instrumentation. According to the literature identified for this study and Mixon’s definitions, drum, guitar, mariachi, steel pan, and technology ensembles are alternative ensembles since they use non-standard instrumentation. HONK! and string ensembles use traditional instrumentation and can be called specialized ensembles.

As interesting as it may be for music educators, categorizing ensembles in this manner may currently be a distinction in search of a difference. There is insufficient research to claim that the instrumentation of an alternative ensemble has a significant effect on student learning. A series of quasi-experimental studies could be designed to investigate the effects of instrumentation on, for example, student attitude toward unfamiliar instruments or timbres.

According to Colley (2009), the dominance of the band, orchestra, and choir trilogy is so great, that any ensemble, regardless of instrumentation should be called an alternative ensemble. Rideout (2005) and Woody (2007) raised important ethical and cultural concerns that challenge the use of the phrase, non-traditional, moving forward. Therefore, the best current definition of alternative ensembles are performing groups that fall outside of traditional performance practice in music education.

The second research question asked about the role these ensembles play in the larger school music program. A limitation of this study is that any information about larger school music program contexts came from literature on alternative ensembles. It is likely that some of the authors were considering broader musical activity in the contexts they investigated, especially in case studies and ethnographies. However, their reporting of data and discussion was focused the alternative ensemble at hand, and it is possible that they may have omitted information about the larger context. Given that limitation though, many authors included in this study provided insight into the role alternative ensembles play in the larger school music program. Oare (2008) and Kuzmich (2013) concluded that alternative ensembles can play a role in expanding the music program generally. This seems to confirm Colley’s (2009) notion that alternative ensembles should expand, rather than replace, offerings. A second role that alternative ensembles play is to include music of different cultures. Both Abril (2009) and Clark (2005) identified mariachi as an ensemble type that shares a culture similar to more and more students as demographic changes occur. Hess (2013), Abril (2009), Oare (2008), and Powell (2003) described alternative ensembles where student, and possibly teacher, backgrounds were different from the cultural origins of the ensemble. Membership in a cultural tradition or national heritage are not prerequisites for participating or leading alternative ensembles.

The methodology of this study was designed to address, most specifically, the third research question by identifying alternative ensembles in the literature. Drum and percussion, guitar, marching band, mariachi, steel pan, string, and technology ensembles were identified. Due to changing student and teacher demographics, as well as a desire among music educators to expand curricular offerings, it is likely that more alternative ensembles exist than are written about with more being created each year. This topic is worthy of reinvestigation from time to time. Perhaps future studies will find that technology ensembles are playing a larger role in school music programs. Or, alternative ensembles based on popular music such as rock bands or hip hop groups will emerge.

Continued research in the form of case studies, ethnographies, and other forms of inquiry are needed to improve the profession's understanding of alternative instrumental ensembles and to provide music educators with models for implementation. Several important questions remain unanswered and could be the focus of a research agenda moving forward. Among them are: 1) How do school demographic factors influence the inclusion of alternative ensembles? 2) How might music teacher education be reformed to include alternative instrumental ensembles? 3) How are alternative instrumental ensembles formed? 4) Do regional trends exist? For example, are HONK! ensembles confined to the northeast and what might cause the isolation? and 5) How are alternative ensembles funded? Do traditional educators view funding as a threat to their existing ensembles?

Tradition and reform are divisive issues in music education. Both sides are right to be concerned that students have access to quality, sequential music study. Perhaps efforts at deciding which tact to take are misguided. Completely traditional ensembles run the risk of becoming calcified, unable to accommodate new demographics or student interest. Completely novel programs, such as those based solely on technology, run the risk of being unmoored and lack the kinds of roots that help offer longevity and stability. A middle ground approach, then, has the best chance of success. Alternative instrumental ensembles create new opportunities while maintaining the best of a performance tradition in the United States.

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