

## EDITOR'S PAGE

Dan Bilawsky – *School Music News* Editor



# BETTER TOGETHER

*Bringing popular music into the fold*

There were plenty of feel-good moments at the NYSSMA® Winter Conference this past December. But beyond the norm — a crowd-pleasing headliner, engaging concert hours, welcoming sessions, high-caliber all-state performances — two stood apart and together, auguring a broader outlook in the state of our field and the field in our state. There were wall-to-wall smiles at the General Business/County Presidents' meeting when, following a motion and vote approving the Association for Popular Music-New York as an official NYSSMA® Affiliate, APME-NY President Dr. Tom Zlabinger called for an all-present selfie/usie to commemorate the occasion; and pure positivity and joy were in the air, bringing audience members to their dancing feet, during the inaugural Modern Band Showcase.

Moving well past mere acceptance, popular music was openly embraced by the masses in Rochester. And it was wonderful to see such a welcome reception. But this begs the obvious question: Why did it take so long for this to happen?

### **Across the great divide**

Despite its omnipresence, or perhaps, in part, because of it, popular music has long been shunned by many a music educator. And it's not hard to see why. The majority in our profession came up through traditional school ensembles and training. We value that foundation and see how it's applicable in other areas, and it was ingrained in us to keep that ball rolling, teach what and how we were taught, maintain a standard atmosphere and continue to expose students to something they're not likely getting outside of school.

There's a certain logic to that line of thinking that's easy to adopt and hard to argue with. But in reality, it's incomplete and flawed. It posits that popular music (among other areas) has little to offer or assumes we've absorbed all its lessons by aural exposure, deals in absolutes of what is and what should never be, and subscribes to a zero-sum mentality whereby it's believed that by adding a measure of popular music we must be removing an aspect of traditional music education. Of course, that's not the case.

There are lessons germane to gigs that match the importance of those delivered in

the classroom and on the formal stage. And flexibility is important in any educational setting. Sure, it's true that there are only so many resources in a given school community — human, financial, time-related and otherwise — and you certainly could substitute one form of music education for another, eliminating a channel for growth and expression while creating a different one. But the overwhelming majority of those advocating for popular music's inclusion aren't looking to push exclusion and force an either/or choice. They're simply hoping to create increased opportunities that jibe with their own journeys, what some students yearn for and the times in which we live.

While preparing this issue of *School Music News*, the great divide — in exposure, interest and access — repeatedly came to the fore. Guest contributor Rebecca Mancuso's "Popular Music Considerations for the Elementary Music Classroom" article illuminates the fact that the author "always felt frustrated with the delineation between 'school music' and 'home music,'" citing a sharp contrast between what she played on viola in school and what she gravitated toward outside, with friends and family.

In our email exchanges, Zlabinger shared a similar experience: "I remember a time when the music I was listening to was not the music I was studying or teaching. And this lasted for most of my life. As a kid in the 1970s, I would hear my dad play Beatles records at home but was being taught only classical music on the piano. Later, in middle school when I picked up trombone, the same divergence continued. Except for holiday music, I never played anything in band that was on the radio."

NYSSMA® Neurodiversity & Accessibility Chair Brian Wagner-Yeung's latest contribution notes, in a different context, that "music teachers should consider using music that our students connect with; provide opportunities for students to make cultural and historical connections; use music that is representative and authentic of our student population; and use music to build meaningful lifelong connections."

And educator and rising-star motivator Vaughan Fleischfresser, while speaking in support of all forms of music education during our conversation, was ever

direct, stating that what he refers to as "the holy trinity of band, choir and orchestra" doesn't appeal to every music-curious student. Fleischfresser subscribes to a *Field of Dreams* philosophy: "if you build it, they will come." So, he suggests, "If you have a kid who plays the guitar, let's form a group for them to be making music with others. [Or] if you have a student who loves GarageBand, let's form a music production group where they can start creating their own music and doing DJ sets at lunch time."

Don't be offended by his frank analysis and suggestions. They sort of make sense, don't they? We can and should give students some measures of increased choice here. And, to be clear, doing so doesn't mean we cede control. It's all just part of a balancing act, a skill area where we, as music educators, thrive.

### **Hard to handle/Easy like Sunday morning**

If you've read the preceding ruminations and you're dismissing them out of hand, or thinking that it's all easier said than done, I get where you're coming from. At the outset of my career as a band director, I would've sooner been caught dead than program a Pop piece. But I can honestly say that my views have softened and changed through experience, and I continue to evolve. There is value and appeal in every form of music education. The world won't stop turning if my band students play a Taylor Swift or Laufey tune programmed next to a Cait Nishimura number, Sousa march, and Standridge showstopper. And it's unlikely that anyone of sound mind, judgement and reason will recoil in horror if (m)any of us start a Modern Band class and teach the music of Stevie Wonder and Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars there. In fact, they might simply smile knowing that we're working on our programs and ourselves with the goal to create more inclusive environments for students. Isn't that what it's all about?

[Editor's Note: Yes, this column contained subtle nods or plainly obvious winks to the music of Jack Johnson, The Band, Led Zeppelin, *Popular* (from Broadway's *Wicked*), Otis Redding/The Black Crowes, and the Commodores. It's only fitting, after all, that popular music be woven into one process while discussing its place in another]. ||