

Uniting our Voices Symposium on Music Education, 2006: Do the Skeptics Have a Case?

By Lee Willingham

By nature we are skeptics. More so now, it seems, than ever.

The value of an event or effort is regularly measured by outcomes...visible, demonstrable. Maybe it is our techno-science based society that makes *results* a higher priority than the ride, the destination more important than the journey. In exploring the value of the symposium, *Uniting our Voices*, that took place in Ottawa this past June, it may be useful if somewhat unappetizing, to take a skeptic's view of what seemed like a magical two days. What was the value of such an endeavour? Was the symposium designed to produce tangible outcomes, or to stimulate and launch a new process? Whether or not skepticism is useful, critiquing an event with which one has had a close relationship cannot do any harm.

"We have had these things before," said one delegate prior to committing to participating. "I simply don't want to take part in a bunch of talk that gets forgotten two weeks later!" A worthy position indeed, from a *skeptical* colleague. Skeptical in the true sense of that word where on the positive side an event such as this may be worth doing and investigating, and on the negative, there is doubt and suspicion. We certainly have had these types of events before and for some, they have made lasting impact, aided in informing directions and choices, and have been worth the time, money, and expended energies.

However, this event, *Uniting our Voices* was unique in several ways, right from the outset. Some background is required to understand where we are today, and from where we started this journey.

Flashback to the Canadian Coastguard College, Sydney, Nova Scotia, August, 1997. This was the inaugural National Arts Education Symposium (NAES) and in this invigorating East Coast atmosphere, the dreams were rich, the conversation animated, and the published symposium proceedings with the title, *Connect, Combine, Communicate* seemed to convey the optimism of Canada's arts education leaders as a result of these stimulating days together. As educational disciplines, the Arts had felt under attack from coast to coast to coast, and in these intense sessions, guided by the vision of Eric Favaro and Betty Hanley, participants fomented strategies for survival, ideas for growth, and an overall sense that committed arts teachers could and would make a difference for Canadian students.

It was during that first NAES that several music educators began a discussion where at least some of the seeds of the latest *Uniting our Voices* event were sown. Musings on finding common ground amongst the diversity of what we Canadians call *music*

education were combined with some thinking around idealistic models of what that might look like.

Several subsequent symposia were held, including meetings in Victoria, Saskatoon, and Ottawa, the final one returning to Nova Scotia in November of 2004. A valuable report and position paper were published, and the Arts Education Advocacy Council was established. Much good was done. But, the skeptics continued to raise critical voices on the impact of such efforts on provincial arts education policies, on improving funding, on advocacy, and most importantly on whether or not there was any measurable effect on students in Canadian classrooms.

Dr. Lee Bartel, then co-editor of the *Canadian Music Educator Journal* and I, raised issues around the efficacy of the Canadian Music Educators' Association three years ago in Volume 45 of this journal, *The Canadian Music Educator/ Musicien éducatrice au Canada* where we addressed the need for a transformed music association that could truly speak for all of Canada's music educators, and a unified journal that could authentically represent the various aspects of music education programs and methods. Some positive response was garnered, but doubt was also raised whether the venerable CMEA/ACEM had the appetite to step up and take a leadership role. Many seemed skeptical. Based upon the lack of action, most, I presume, were either complacent or comfortable with status quo.

In the fall of 2003, as part of the Saskatchewan Music Educators' Association conference, a *Uniting our Voices* symposium was held, chaired by Jane Cutler and facilitated by Eleanor Newman and Dennis Tupman. (Eleanor, coincidentally, facilitated the first NAES in Sydney, 1997.) The event advertised the following five goals within its purpose:

1. Collaborating with other music organizations on significant projects
2. Sharing resources, expertise, and services among all music organizations
3. Speaking to policy makers about music curriculum
4. Advocating for music and music education in schools and communities in all regions and areas of Canada and,
5. Other areas of mutual concern.

Newman presided over four sessions and the participants drafted the following action statement:

Key Results

- We speak with one voice
- We come together as Music Organizations to work on Projects

- We know who we are
- We raise Public Awareness

Actions: Uniting Our Voices

The assembled group put forth the following action items, which can be achieved through collaboration and cooperation among existing music education organizations

- 1) That each music organization publishes a common article reporting on the symposium and its call to collective action and by so doing we draw attention to that which unites us. Symposium highlights to be composed by Jane Cutler, Dennis Tupman and Eleanor Newman and to be available in December 2003.
- 2) That each music organization commit to collaborating on a joint journal “Music: we are different, we are one” within the next eighteen months and by so doing we each connect with more music educators. CMEA has agreed to coordinate this endeavour.
- 3) That each music organization promote and support a common theme for a national “music week” and by so doing we focus the energy of music educators across the country and draw positive scrutiny from national and local media. The Music Coalition has indicated it will pursue this idea.
- 4) That each music organization commit to gathering and simultaneously publishing stories by current and former students on the theme of “Music Changed My Life” and by so doing we unite the voices of our students and gain media and parental recognition. We need a lead organization to champion this idea.
- 5) That we establish a comprehensive directory of Canadian Music Organizations and make it available on a website and by so doing we make it easier to speak to one another, share information, reach each other’s members. We need a core group to champion this idea.
- 6) That we bring representatives of the national music organizations together, engage the assistance of a professional facilitator, and develop plans for future cooperation. CMEA has indicated a willingness to initiate this.
- 7) That each of us think nationally and act locally in matters of advocacy and mentoring of new teachers and by so doing we encourage others to add their voices in support of music education.

The cynic differs from the skeptic in that as its positive pole it proffers contradiction; its negative pole is denigration. Modern day cynics view the world in terms of what isn't, or of what won't work. Let us remind ourselves that skeptics question the value of a position or a stated action, and can be positive when value can be demonstrated or proven.

After the *Regina Papers* were published in *The Canadian Music Educator/ Musicien éducatrice au Canada*, Vol 45, No 3, Spring, 2004, one might have expected a great stir of activity, a flurry of rubber hitting the pavement, a magnetic pull towards unity in stated purpose and observable action. Alas, it was not so. Skepticism in some corners morphed into cynicism, and leadership and people could (or would) not unite on a common project or move beyond the rhetoric of the Results and Actions disseminated in Regina. It was no surprise that when the 2006 Uniting our Voices invitation appeared, some expressed doubts about the worthiness of yet another meeting of talking...a meeting that would cost thousands of dollars and haul people across the country yet one more time.

Canada's music education forces needed a magic potion. A central word in our creed as music educators is "hope." After Regina and the several NAES's, the profession had hope, and now it required strategies, funding, facilities, and a uniting purpose that could foster our hope, give it legs to walk and run... even fly. This magic potion came in the form of two separate organizations who were forging an interesting partnership.

The Coalition for Music Education in Canada (CMEC) and the National Arts Center Orchestra (NACO) in Ottawa with the stalwart support of Jane Cutler and Allan Anderson tendered the idea that together, with corporate sponsorship, such an event could be again staged. (Jane is on the executive of the CMEC, and a board member of CMEA/ACEM, and Allan is the president of CMEA/ACEM). Ingrid Whyte, CMEC's Executive Director, and Claire Speed, Education Manager at NACO energized the committee under Cutler's excellent leadership, and the meeting began to take on flesh and bones. Dennis Tupman and Ninette Babineau were recruited as facilitators and advisors. A structure for the symposium was emerging, and an invitation list was created.

Who would be invited? After all, there was funding for accommodation, meals, and the cost of the meetings. This funding, from corporations, music industry, and music education associations meant that the country's musical diversity could be well represented, but with finite financial limitations. In some corners, the cynicism that resulted from Regina's inertia turned to disappointment that not all who had a vested interest in music education could be accommodated. Nevertheless, the list, some forty-five participants, sought to include all facets of music education in Canada, including (please forgive the acronyms) ACCC, CMIEC, KSC, CBA, CPO, NACO, MIAC, CMP, OC, CMEC, LTTA, MusicFest, and all of the provincial MEA's, and more.

The energy on that opening Friday evening was palpable. People were arriving from all corners of the country. Friendships and associates were re-uniting, visiting, and beginning to talk of the proceedings that were to follow. It was striking to observe such a range of representatives in one place...the manager of the National Arts Centre Orchestra in deep conversation with the president of Carl Orff Canada; the CEO of Music Industry Association of Canada warmly greeting the executive director of the Association of Canadian Choral Conductors, and on and on where the contiguity of such encounters were seemingly infinite and improbable.

The gathering resumed early Saturday morning with the singing of *Jubilate Deo* in canon. Oh yes, the band and orchestra people sang too! So did the arts managers and CEO's of this and that association. What fine singing, laden with hope, expectation, and joy. Peter Herndorff, CEO of the National Arts Centre also sang lustily, and then in his greetings remarked, "more than 40 years later, I am still impacted by my high school educator, Mr. Morris...he led me to a career in broadcasting and journalism and more indirectly to a life in the performing arts." How affirming. How hopeful for those who had come to make a difference in young peoples' lives in and through the study of music.

Three focus conversations provided a framework for identifying the musical landscape in Canada, for defining needs and challenges, and for designing action strategies:

1. What is your organization currently doing to improve music education for every child in all schools?
2. Keep in mind the conference theme. Dream a little. Brainstorm. Scare us. What creative action do you think might be possible? No matter how farfetched. Reach outside the box. Be creative.
3. How do we bring the dreams alive? What will they look like?

Dennis Tupman, Canada's own music education prophet and general wise sage, played a key role in Uniting Our Voices even though due to illness he could not be present. He sent the delegation words of encouragement and challenge, and likened the spirit of the symposium to the Inukshuk. The Inukshuk is a symbol of the human spirit. In the Inukshuk, each stone is a separate entity. But each supports, and is supported by the one above and the one below it. No one piece is any more or less important than another. The stones are secured through balance. In likening the gathering in the symposium to an Inukshuk, Tupman provided both a concrete and metaphysical guiding image for the participants.

An Inukshuk is the result of a consensus of purpose, of focused action by a group united in its goal and labour. It recognizes the ability to succeed with others, where alone there would be failure. It reminds us of the need to belong to something greater than ourselves. It reinforces our ability to create, communicate and commit to common goals. The Inukshuk reminds us of our interdependent responsibilities to invest our efforts today to direct a better way for all of us tomorrow (summarized from the World Wide Web of the Unitarian Universalist Peace Fellowship, Raleigh, NC).

Pessimists, cynics, and misanthropes can rarely function within the dimensions of such a powerfully spiritual and physical image, especially when delivered from Tupman's mount of transformation and soul-searching honesty. The symposium had its focus questions, its guiding image, and with a few instructions from Co-Chair Jane Cutler (such as "Leave your baggage at the door," and, "Speak only in headlines") the only thing left to do was to follow the compass and discover where it would lead.

The reader will not be shocked to learn that people are very different, and differences arise acutely in situations where the *ends* are not clearly evident. Purposefully, the organizers did not set goals or outcomes, simply laid down paths of possibilities. Not all individuals function comfortably in a constructivist climate where dreaming is the main order of the day. Especially, where dreaming was to be “farfetched” and “outside the box.” It was a difficult part of the process, since for most of the overworked and underfunded music educators dreaming would mean doing more and better what is already being done. That was not good enough dreaming for facilitator Ninette Babineau, who urged the dreamers to not be inhibited by barriers of tradition, limitations of territory, bureaucracy or finances. This was to be *fantasy* time.

It sure is tough to dream when you are skeptical. Yet I say, bless the skeptics. Let us keep in mind that skeptics are more like “Doubting Thomas” than the cynical and pessimistic Clare Booth Luce who reportedly said “no good deed goes unpunished.” We need those who are willing to search for truth and its evidence, and thankfully, these seekers were scattered evenly throughout the delegation. The voices of dreamers, truth-seekers, skeptics, and optimists were abundant. Happily, pessimists and cynics did not participate. Furthermore, those *punishable* good deeds or as Howard Gardner defines “the good work” that could be applied to all sorts of educative endeavours, and supremely so in the work of music education, was right there for all to experience, in the detail of the proceedings.

Gardner, in addressing the convocation of teacher graduates at the University of Toronto a few years ago, dealt with this issue in a speech entitled “Navigating Toward Good Work.” He differentiated between what we often think of as our “job”, and our WORK. There are many musicians of high caliber, but only a few who do GOOD WORK. (He cited Yo-Yo Ma and Elton John as examples of musicians among the latter category.) Many scientists and lawyers do outstanding work, but only a few use their skills for purposes of world peace and betterment.

The word “good” suggests that there is some expertise, competency... a sense of quality. Another sense of that word is in the service of a wider community. In a time of such universal need, those who volunteer or go beyond the mandate of “job” are considered to be among those who do good work. Without doubt, the focused dreaming and thinking that symposium delegates experienced in these hours together falls within Gardner’s view of good work. These were the kinds of folks that skeptics love. There is evidence. Action. Tangibility. And, megatons of energy.

How do we know if we do good work? What measure can we apply against a work that demands so much, and carries such a high premium? Gardner provided his attentive audience with a taxonomy that helps to ensure that the work of expert quality also serves the common good. It is worth sharing.

1. Responsibility to oneself, one’s own personal goals;
2. Responsibility to those around you—family, friend, colleagues and fellow workers;

3. Responsibility to your calling, your chosen profession or craft or line of work;
 4. Responsibility to the institution for which you work;
 5. Responsibility to the wider world—to those whom you do not know, to those who will come after you are gone, to the planet over which we have been given temporary stewardship, and, you may wish to add, responsibility to your God.
- (Howard Gardner, Convocation Speech, June 22, 2001, University of Toronto).

Quality dreaming takes time, and brainstorming is not a very sequential, task driven, goal focused process. Nevertheless, dreaming caused the emergence of some important common threads...listed here as presented by the various recorders of the dream groups. These were the geneses of what will become action... the “good work” that will, in time, be the legacy of Uniting Our Voices. Each statement represents a common dream, a consensus of many thinkers:

- Music Education Network (Mentoring, Interactive journal Website, Best Practices (teaching, concerts), Resource Sharing)
- Canadian Music Teachers Centre in every district
- Teacher pre-service and in-service training programs (preparation, motivation, support)
- Government influence (professional lobbyist, Federal Music Ed Council, Tax Credit for music Education, National Library)
- Community (Artists, Schools, Collaboration with retired professionals and teachers)
- Corporate Health Break (“Participaction”, Music Making as Fitness)
- Daily Music Activities in every school (provincial government; mandated)
- National music education Journal (Regular Publication (including all voices), reaches all members/ the public, supported through music industry advertising)
- District Level (consultants and coordinators, specialists in schools, informed administrators)
- Accessibility (world music, school of Rock, Canadian or cultural diversity, special needs, family programs in schools)

With a nucleus of ideas, and a shared understanding of what these ideas mean to the collective, the final stage of the symposium was to animate the dreams. How could they become reality? Here’s where the “bottom line crowd” met the fantasizer optimist gang. Discussions about what is the overall goal of music education elicited responses such as

“to get more people *playing music*.” What about the singers the cry went up? Composers? Listeners?

There was an urgency to get to the government policy makers, to have a national lobby, to generate abundant funding, to appoint a national spokesperson, and even to help parents eradicate an epidemic of national parental lenience...to mentor effective parenting so that the pride *and pain* of music making would be part of growing up. Does this sound more like dreaming than action to you?

In the remaining minutes together, some real action potential took place in the form of a motion, which read: “...that a steering committee will be formed representing the music education-related ideas and interests of the 40 organizations gathered here today and will include regional representation, both official languages, stakeholders with interests in orchestras, universities, community, multi and inter-cultural, business and marketing, and government.”

To add personal commitment to the dream-action process, each participant wrote a “Dear Me” letter addressing the key meaning that the symposium provided for them, and a commitment to action in leadership for each of the participating organization and association. This letter was mailed to each delegate at the beginning of September, 2006. The final session concluded with the singing of *Dona Nobis Pacem*, a prayer for peace.

So, fellow music educators, where does this leave us? The committee is charged with creating a means to form a national steering committee to further act on the dreams of Uniting Our Voices, 2006. Each delegate made a personal commitment to action, and **has** been reminded of their own contract with themselves by letter. Ninette Babineau eloquently challenged all in her concluding remarks with this taxonomy of partnership and unity,

We must realize our partnership as a synergy and envision a plan toward a national paradigm shift. Steps towards a successful organization include moving from a state of dependence to a level of confidence and independence and finally to interdependence, a place of collaboration, shared vision, and one voice.

Confidence. Independence. Interdependence. Collaboration. Shared vision.
ONE VOICE. All enshrouded with eternal hope, because according to Howard Gardner, those who improve the work of education are engaged in doing “good work.”

I must confess that my personal dreams for music education in this country did not even land on the table...no one else even raised them. That could make me a skeptic. Probably, the same could be said for others on the organizing team, and even the other participants. The most important thing is that a shared set of challenges was identified and named, and that a desire for action for the betterment of Canada through better music education was declared. My own set

of crises and issues now seem a little silly once a greater light of the whole has been shined on our reality.

The key action now lies in the leadership of those who represented the myriad methods, jurisdictions, ideologies, and music education associations. Leadership takes a rare kind of courage and is alarmingly rare. Just look at the dearth of great character and courage in political leadership. (Did that sound skeptical?) Will there be real action from this symposium? It depends.

One of the ways to play the skeptic's game is to objectively and unemotionally critique your own organization. Could it be better, do more, have a larger footprint for the cause? This is a tough process. We have historical and territorial baggage. Organizations have constitutions, which have governing rules, which have the power, seemingly, to choke the very breath out of those among us with vision and insight. What would happen, for example, if the CMEA/ACEM disappeared as it is now known, and became something entirely new or different? What if it were subsumed by another effective group with nationally similar goals? What if partnerships would create previously unknown allies that could work together nationally under the same umbrella? The same questions must be applied to all of our esteemed organizations. What about the Canadian Band Association, Carl Orff Canada, the Coalition for Music Education in Canada, and on and on. Are there sacred cows? Is anything too sacred to better the cause? Do we have the appetite and the stomach for true transformation?

In short, the answer is, "we must."

Uniting Our Voices in truth, was first about saying "hello" to each other in a different way. After our greeting, with a drink and sandwich in hand and a time limited task, the deep and profound issues on Canada's music education minds were quickly raised and dealt with. The collective voice emerged, just as good constructivist education theory demonstrates. Hope is an important aspect of action, for to act without hope breeds cynicism and pessimism. However, hope is the friend of the skeptic who, when hope is present, brings realistic energies to bear on the process that leads to those cherished results.

Do the skeptics have a case on this one? I leave that to you.

Lee Willingham, Associate Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, was Co-Chair of Uniting Our Voices, 2006.

(Uniting our Voices Symposium on Music Education was held at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada June 23-25 and was hosted by the National Arts Centre Orchestra. Delegates were invited as representatives of the music education

community of Canada. The Steering Committee was comprised of: Jane Cutler, Lee Willingham, Co-Chairs, Claire Speed, Ingrid Whyte, Ninette Babineau and Dennis Tupman. A complete and detailed report of the proceedings in both official languages, including the names of the participants is being prepared and will be available for dissemination.)