



Editorial

To Glee or Not to Glee

By Benjamin Bolden

I admit it. I watch Glee.

Most of the time, I even quite enjoy it.

I am in exalted company! President Obama and his family are also 'Gleeks.' In fact, the cast even did a live performance at the White House. (I suppose it pays to have connections.) This show is significant—a definite zeitgeist contributor. There is even a Canadian connection. Cory Monteith plays Finn, the sensitive football jock who sings in the shower and awkwardly lumbers rather than dances like a...well, kind of like me. Monteith was raised in Victoria, BC. (He has also lived in Nanaimo and Vancouver, and has worked as a Walmart greeter and a roofer) (Hedegaard, 2010).

Music educators are taking note. Illinois high school Choral Director Daniel Gregerman, whose enviable music program includes five concert choirs and three vocal jazz ensembles, claims: "I watch the show religiously every week. I download it and watch it the next day, keeping it running while I'm working to see what kinds of arrangements they're doing and what artists they're representing" (quoted in Loudon, 2010, para. 11).

And what is the impact of this television program on music education and educators in Canadian schools? I spoke with one high school vocal music teacher who told me there are pros and cons. While acknowledging the increased interest in coming out to join choir, even amongst 'jocks' (you can sing and still be cool—golly gee whiz, I've know that for ages...), she finds it challenging to introduce the Glee-struck choir members to varied repertoire, and difficult to meet the Glee-provoked expectations that students will sound and feel like rock stars. Back on the positive side, my source values the show's emphasis on acceptance, belonging, and solidarity amongst members of the group; the powerful team and community building in evidence is something she can tap into and encourage in her own ensembles. She also appreciates the message of

choir as a safe haven for those on the edges of the high school scene—for those students who are not accepted anywhere else. (Unfortunately, she is simultaneously frustrated by the uncomfortable knowledge that in her own school students are only permitted to join choir if their parents and timetables also allow them to register in a vocal music course.)

There seems little doubt that the Glee phenomenon is generating enthusiasm for singing, group singing, and more specifically, singing in schools. Vocalists of all stripes and affiliations are coming out of the woodwork—even the cool kids. One young 17-year old Glee camper (yes, this goes beyond schools; there are now Glee camps) explains what drew her:

"When I was younger, it was uncool to be in choir and show choir and all that kind of stuff, but now they see these people who are doing this, and they're sounding amazing...It's making people think that this is actually acceptable, and it's not just acceptable, it's awesome. People who are talented are now cool." (quoted in Addcox, 2010)

(Incidentally, isn't it cool that 'cool' is still cool?) In a poll conducted by the U.S. National Association for Music Education, 43% of participating choral directors noted a significant increase in student interest and enrollment in vocal music, which they directly attributed to Glee's impact. Not surprisingly, directors also noted a huge number of requests from choir members that songs from the show be added to their repertoire (Loudon, 2010). Vocal ensemble directors are responding. At Hal Leonard, sales of Glee sheet music are through the roof. The signature Glee arrangement of Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'* (intro: dun dun dun), tops the list (Loudon).

What are the resulting pressures on music educators? Students who join up because they want to have an experience like the characters in Glee may well be arriving to choir practice along with some unrealistic expectations. When a TV audience hears the Glee songs, they experience exten-

sively digitally manipulated studio-produced music. The robot-like vocal sound results from the generous employment of automatic pitch correction, equalization, frequency boosting, and a plethora of other audio effects. Instrumental accompaniment, while very occasionally minimal, is often massive, featuring multi-tracked professional musicians supported by an armoury of sophisticated and costly studio equipment. The costumes, venues, sets, stage lighting, and special effects that the characters in Glee enjoy are probably a little beyond the scope of most school music budgets. And then, of course, there are those pesky rehearsals! TV Glee leaves the blood, sweat, and tears—the *work* of learning and performance preparation—off camera. Newcomers to singing may be unpleasantly surprised to learn that music does not immediately sound great right after the song is introduced. What happens when the imagined fantasy does not materialize? Will students be content to approximate? Will they stick around?

Despite the potential for raising unrealistic expectations of local music programs, there is much about the show that music educators appreciate. While some may bemoan the fact that the show only features pop music, Choral Director Daniel Gregerman counters: "I think they're doing a great service in showing a variety of musical styles, eras and genres, and demonstrating how pieces can be crossed from one style to another" (quoted in Loudon, 2010, para. 11). Tim Davis does the show's vocal arranging and coaches the singers on set and in the studio. He champions the show's contemporary take on choral tradition: "What we've been trying to do is create a vocal group that is as current as can be, with aggressive vocals and difficult counterpoint vocal lines, and things that are interesting and challenging to do" (Loudon, para. 7). Even if one remains sceptical about the show's vocal music depth and breadth, perhaps young people will be drawn in to singing (so the argument goes), 'get the bug', and so encounter and open up to

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other styles and genres of music as well.

While we're on the hopeful side, as educational budget cuts loom, perhaps Glee can help keep the cuts at bay by illuminating the potential value of arts involvement for young people and the importance of arts programs in schools (offering a place of acceptance/community for the outsiders and marginalized, an opportunity for self-expression, a chance to find yourself, and so on). As pre-service music education graduate student Justine Dolorfino blogs: "music is seen as, well, an incredibly positive force in the lives of the student characters on the show" (2010). Dr. Tim Brent, director of vocal jazz studies at the University of North Texas says:

"Arts teachers are losing their jobs all over the place. I'm not saying the show is going to have the power to do much about that, but if you've got students coming out of the woodwork who are now interested in singing and there is enough of a demand, then school superintendents and principals are going to have to react." (quoted in Loudon, 2010, para. 8)

Realistically, it may take more than Glee to convince some. Although a Utah school principal sees *Glee* as a way to inspire students to sing, his budget has no place for choir. The principal told the Salt Lake Tribune: "It's a great teaching opportunity to get two songs and mash them together like they do on the show. It would be an awesome thing to find the right parent who could form a glee club and do some modern music" (quoted in Sims, 2010, para. 11-12).

Personally, there are some things that bother me about the show—for example, the fact that the group always features the same few members as lead singers, while the others are usually audibly indiscernible. Admittedly, they are at least present, and often dancing more than the lead vocalists. Different ways to contribute, perhaps...

Another criticism...I was listening recently to a CBC interview with Stephen Sondheim who was bemoaning the fact that shows such as *Jersey Boys* on Broadway and *Glee* on TV are juke box musicals—they make use of existing songs only, not songs composed specifically for the show. I feel it is a bit sad that the show is only recycling songs, rather than creating new ones (although, admittedly, they are new arrangements...). As a diehard creativity and composing advocate, I think this is a missed opportunity; it would be wonderful if some of the *Glee* characters were to not only take on exist-

ing songs as their own, but actually compose songs themselves. I'm glad they've helped make singing cool—now what about composing?

Then there is the frustrating perpetuation of the talent myth. As arts education blogger Patti Saraniero points out, the show studiously avoids the work involved—the learning and practicing necessary to realize musical performance. Unlike shows about sports (e.g. *Friday Night Lights*) that tend to emphasize hard work, *Glee* ignores it, or worse still, pretends it isn't necessary. Saraniero responds:

If we continue our national narrative that sports require hard work, commitment and teamwork while the arts are for those individuals with a natural talent, we undermine the intrinsic value of the arts in schools. It is my hope we will get a chance to see the *Glee* kids sweat. (June 9, 2010, <http://ethicsandartseducation.blogspot.com/>)

There are also some things I really like about *Glee*, and not just the superb (or at least highly entertaining) singing and dancing and the engaging, quirky characters and stories. There is much I appreciate in terms of the music teaching and learning. For example Will, the group's director, often performs both for and with his choir. I believe this to be an extremely positive teaching/learning practice for both students and teachers. Students are provided the opportunity to experience a live and intimate performance, warts and all. It may not be brilliant, but it will be real! It is a levelling thing, performing for students. I believe it is immensely valuable for students to see before them and beside them not just teachers, but also performers, and real human performers, who make mistakes, get frustrated, occasionally look and sound ridiculous, but who know how to work to bring music to life. For teachers, performing for students is valuable on one level simply because it requires us to go to the effort of preparing and performing a piece. (Some music educators, I know, do this constantly, outside the classroom as well as inside—but many, I wager, do not.) It is likely a love for the experience of preparing and performing music that brought us to teaching in the first place, and it is helpful to be intimately reminded, frequently, what it is all about. For one thing, it helps to illuminate what our students experience, and enjoy and fear and struggle with, and therefore what they need—how we might support them, and how and when and why we might show compassion. And then performing *with* students—I find, anyway—is just plain fun. What a thrill to

momentarily leave behind the student teacher barriers and work and strive together to make music! What an empowering experience for students to sing and play alongside us, perhaps even correct our mistakes, and to help us when we are lost. Above all, by making music for and with our students, we humanize ourselves.

But back to *Glee*. Should music educators embrace this opportunity and jump on the *Glee* bandwagon? And what does that mean exactly? Does it mean performing music that is hip and cool? Does it mean performing the songs on the show? Does it mean buying a whole lot of audio equipment? (Or maybe you could have 'Glee Unplugged?') What do we risk? Will we be compromising rich and varied music learning possibilities? Will teachers still be able to continue to stretch students' listening and performing experiences?

Perhaps it is best to simply sidestep this phenomenon and the inherent temptations. To shun the notion of becoming a music Glee educator altogether. To soldier on and offer up—not necessarily *traditional* school music, but—*other*, non-*Glee* musical experiences. (An anti-*Glee* choir, maybe?)

Or, like good Canadians, should we straddle the midpoint and find the balance?

To *Glee* or not to *Glee*, that is the question!

Or, perhaps more realistically, to what extent? CME

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Please respond through the ether to: bbolden@uvic.ca