

Sexual Orientation and Music Education

Continuing a Tradition

Abstract: This article offers an overview of sexual orientation and music education, in particular how sexual orientation—specifically, heterosexuality—has been dominant in the teaching of music in the United States. Scenarios of heterosexual privilege related to music students, music teachers, and instructional content are presented. After acknowledging heterosexuality's position of privilege in music education, the author asks the question of whether people are willing to remove it as they have done with other privileges, in the interest of meeting students' needs and as the profession has matured.

Keywords: homosexuality and education, United States, homosexuality and music, gay teenagers

Our society expects those in the music education profession to contribute to its development by affirming and educating future generations. As individuals, perhaps we were even attracted to music education by that call. Historically, we have been fairly willing to examine and transform what we do in order to meet the changing needs of the students who walk into our classrooms. Commercial interests as well as laws or statutes and other direct governmental actions have at times fostered change. Our profession also changes because of individual and collective dedication to children and young adults whose needs and interests as music learners we willingly accept as different from ours. Anyone who teaches in a

high school knows that teenagers do not always think, act, or learn like adults.

Our profession is rooted and grows from (1) our individual interest in meeting the needs of our students and (2) our collective charge to educate our students, many of whom will be important participants in society in the future. Offered as an expansion on these foundational values, this article will show how sexual orientation, specifically and almost exclusively, heterosexuality, has traditionally been present in music education. Before us is the opportunity to consider how we might improve the work we do individually and collectively by acknowledging other sexual orientations, specifically, homosexuality.

Isn't it time for us to acknowledge the ways we reinforce heterosexuality and the heterosexual lifestyle, and to examine how homophobia biases our curricular content and the lives and work of LGBT music teachers?

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Editor's note. For more information and updated statistics since the original 2009 publication of this article, go to the 2011 Classroom Climate Study available at <http://glsen.org/press/2011-nationalschool-climate-survey>.

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Do I Know What I Would Do When . . .

1. a section leader in my ensemble talks with me that she is worried that the students in her section don't respect her because they think she is a lesbian?
2. a student complains that his section leader is picking on him because he thinks the section leader, who is gay, has a crush on him?
3. a new colleague is hired in the music department who is openly homosexual. I am comfortable around him/her and happen to like and respect this valued colleague. A few months later, one of my trusted friends in my department pulls me aside and tells me that there are rumors that I, too, am gay.
4. I am backstage during a rehearsal of the school musical and catch two male students kissing?

For an anonymous, online discussion of these questions moderated by the author, go to <http://groups.google.com/group/MusicEd-Orientation>. [Closed due to Internet trolling.]

The focus is limited to high school students and teachers, but the issues raised are relevant to students and colleagues at other levels. To discuss how the issue of sexual orientation might be encountered in teachers' daily work, an online discussion group titled "Do I Know What I Would Do When . . . ?" has been set up. There, teachers will be asked to project and discuss responses to situations in which they unexpectedly encounter questions of sexual orientation in music classrooms (for examples, see the sidebar). This anonymous, moderated, online discussion of these questions has been set up at <http://groups.google.com/group/MusicEd-Orientation>. [Closed due to Internet trolling.]

High School: Not the Same for All Students

Contrary to what parents of adolescents may think, adolescents work hard. They

exert great energy trying to fill a need to have trusting peer and adult relationships that help them find out who they are or might be as adults.

American society has always done its best to foster and nurture students as they attempt to define what it means to be an adult. Our schools offer many programs, activities, and clubs and support traditions designed to contribute to students' social and emotional development.

Too often, however, high schools are developmental wastelands for youth in sexual orientation minorities, that is, those who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). In a recent report on school climate,

- nine of ten LGBT high school students were verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation;
- 60 percent of LGBT students feel unsafe because of personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation or race/ethnicity, compared to one out of five students in the general population;
- about a third of LGBT students are absent or miss class for safety reasons, compared with only 5 to 6 percent of students in general;
- almost half (44.1 percent) of LGBT students experience harassment or assault; and
- nearly two-thirds of LGBT students heard homophobic remarks from school personnel.¹

These behaviors contaminate the school environment and make adolescence an even greater challenge for LGBT students. Such experiences can lead to internalized self-hatred and emotional pain that contribute to a higher risk of substance abuse among LGBT youth as a means of numbing those feelings.² These experiences constitute real dangers to LGBT students' emotional and physical well-being, even though schools are charged with ensuring the safety of all students.

There is an increased awareness of this reality for LGBT students. A growing number of school districts are making efforts to curtail harassment and discrimination in schools through

legislative and policy changes.³ However, I could find no information about the percentage of American school districts that is providing in-service workshops on diversity or sexual orientation that may improve the lives of LGBT youth in schools.

Rather than well-intended sympathy, empathy from and supportive alliances with straight teachers, staff, and students are needed. For LGBT students are not at risk because they are gay, but largely because of societal attitudes and developmental issues over which they have little control. It is the fear, dislike, and even hatred of LGBT people or same-sex relationships that threaten these students, not their emotional-romantic interests and attractions.

When we recognize that the high school experience is not the same for LGBT students as it is for heterosexual students, we begin to see the deficits inherent in trying to treat all students the same—as if all were heterosexual. One of the first actions we can take as educators is to identify the ways through which we provide privilege for heterosexual students based on our accepting that even though heterosexuality is certainly more common, heterosexuality is not normal for some of our students.⁴

Privileges of Heterosexuality

Schools and music programs are not neutral when it comes to sexual orientation. Heterosexual students and teachers enjoy advantages over their LGBT counterparts regarding their professional environment, classroom experiences, and visibility in instructional materials. These privileges may not be evident to their straight counterparts.

Privileges for Heterosexual Music Students

It is likely that unless your music teacher is openly gay, as a straight student, you are advantaged in the following ways:

1. Your music teacher fully understands what you are going through during your first big romantic crush

or your first breakup. If you want to, you can talk to any teacher about these matters of the heart without having to consider her or his reaction to your sexual orientation.

2. Your teacher will assume you are just as excited as the other students about going to events such as the prom, the band banquet, the music department tour, or an overnight trip. You do not have to worry that at these events, or even just in class, other students will notice you staring at that “special someone.”
3. You can comfortably and appropriately show how you care romantically about someone else, and can see your peers show how they care.
4. All the love songs you hear on the radio, sing, or play in an ensemble are about a kind of love you know and understand. The annual spring musical is, in almost all cases, going to involve a romantic subplot about a kind of love that resembles yours.
5. When, as a countertenor who wins a spot in the all-state women’s treble chorus, you are subsequently excluded because you are male, you do not have to wonder if your being straight had anything to do with it. A gay student singer in the same situation could not be assured that his exclusion was a matter of policy and not discrimination. Whether it was or not is something you do not have to consider if you are heterosexual.

In addition to these advantages for straight students, heterosexuality enjoys an advantaged position in terms of what is taught in music classes. Curricular content in schools is decidedly heterosexual. In fact, in seven states, a teacher is prohibited from portraying LGBT issues or people in a positive manner.⁵ This academic censorship aside, only 12.7 percent of students in a 2007 survey reported that they were taught anything about LGBT people, history, or events in school. Within this subgroup, only about four in ten students (or five out of every thousand students) reported being taught this type of more-inclusive content in music classes.⁶

What this means to heterosexual students in our music classrooms is that the information presented in their classes will confirm the existence of individuals just like them, and of relationships and romantic feelings just like theirs. These benefits for heterosexual music students—even if unspoken or unintentional—do not apply to LGBT students.

Privileges for Heterosexual Music Teachers

Like heterosexual students, straight music teachers enjoy advantages over their gay counterparts. These are demonstrated in the qualities of their workplace environment, interactions with students and their families, and even in the teaching strategies at their disposal. As a straight music teacher, it is perfectly acceptable in all fifty states of the United States for you

1. to speak freely about your personal life and activities in response to a student’s innocent question. Gay teachers have fewer choices: tell the truth and reveal their orientation, lie and change pronouns to opposite sex in referring to a partner, or share nothing about themselves.
2. to use stories from your personal life in your teaching, without editing. For example, when working with a band on a march, you can talk about the rhythmic precision needed by relating it to your experience seeing a British military parade on a trip you took with your husband or wife to London over the summer. You can do this
 - without having to conceal certain information or using ambiguous pronouns.
 - without being accused of “promoting the heterosexual lifestyle” or “talking about sex.”
 - without worrying that the school administration or parents will be upset that you talked about your life partner, domestic partner, or (admittedly, in a few states) your same-sex husband or wife.

3. to put pictures of your spouse/family on your office wall or desk.
4. to kiss your boyfriend/girlfriend/wife/husband good-bye in front of the school building when you board the bus for the spring choir trip.
5. to invite your partner to go along on school trips and tours, and to not wonder if anyone is going to stare at you and your partner when you sit together on the bus or come out of your hotel room.
6. to answer the question, “Do you have a boyfriend?” when asked by a student, without considering whether he or she suspects you are anything but heterosexual.
7. to consider whether you were not hired or you lost your job because of your sexual orientation. However, if you are a music teacher who is gay, laws in thirty states will not protect you from being fired or from not being hired or promoted on the basis of sexual orientation.⁷
8. to include all your social and civic interests on your resume when applying for jobs. Even as a straight person who is an ally for LGBT persons, you might still worry about including the names of gay and lesbian rights or social groups on your resume.
9. to wear a ring on the fourth finger of your baton hand and have people assume you are married to a person of the opposite sex and that they understand what that means in terms of intimacy and commitment. You will not be asked to comment on or be asked about information in response to questions such as, Where do you live? What do you do together? What do your children think of having straight parents? Have you ever been a victim of straight bashing?
10. to dismiss the idea that your love for music and your musical skills will be seen as “typical of people like you.”
11. to ignore whether people think that you have converted a straight student to your “straight lifestyle.”

12. to be just “a music teacher,” not “the *gay* music teacher.”
13. to have your spouse call you and leave a message on the music office answering machine that ends with “Love you. . . . Later,” without worrying when a student is in the office when you hear the message.
14. to give out your home phone number and not worry about people’s reactions when your spouse answers the phone.
15. to give a simple “No, thank you” when a colleague tries to set you up on a blind date without wondering if he or she suspects you are gay and that he or she is just testing you with the offer.
16. to avoid being asked to speak on behalf of all straight teachers in America.

LGBT music students and music teachers may indeed experience the music classroom differently than their heterosexual counterparts. Although some of these differences reflect general societal attitudes regarding sexual orientation, heterosexuality also enjoys privileged status in how we decide what to teach in our classroom. This is something over which we have direct control and is thus more easily changed.

How Standard 9 Shows Heterosexual Norms and Poses Homosexual Dilemmas

The normalcy of heterocentric content in music teaching can be made clear when we consider three examples that represent National Music Standard 9: “Understanding music in relation to history and culture.”⁸ These examples are written to represent common ways teachers embed heterosexuality in their teaching. Each easily understandable and heterocentric example is then paired with a description of a homosexual analogy presented as questions to consider.

1. A composer’s family history will be part of biographical information taught, or provided to students for general information, or as a particular way to

improve a student’s or an ensemble’s performance.

Heterosexual norm: In studying Mark Hindsley’s arrangement for band of Wagner’s “Prelude and Love Death,” from *Tristan und Isolde*, students might be told to play more expressively because of the piece’s emotional message and content. You might mention (a) that it was Wagner’s love for his patron’s wife that inspired him to compose the work and (b) that in general, Wagner’s romantic relationships with his opposite-sex lovers (even those outside his marriage!) were important inspirations for much of his work.

Could we do this as easily as we would the following?

Homosexual dilemma: What would you do with Benjamin Britten’s relationship of thirty-nine years with the tenor Peter Pears, a relationship that was an undeniably important factor in the development of twentieth-century opera? Would you deny their relationship and this fact when you and a colleague from the English department have the students watch a video of a production of Britten’s opera *The Turn of the Screw*, an opera Britten wrote specifically for his same-sex lover, as was the case for all of Britten’s important operas except one?

2. Historical events, values, and figures that are related to the piece in some fashion will be communicated to students as part of their learning.

Heterosexual norm: When teaching about themes in the *English Folk Song Suite for Military Band* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, we would not hesitate to include information about British folk songs and Vaughan Williams’s deep respect for the same.

Homosexual dilemma: In studying *Lincoln Portrait*, a piece for a speaker and orchestra (or band) based on famous speeches by Abraham Lincoln,

- (a) would we tell students that this work was removed from President

Eisenhower’s inaugural events just two days before it was to be played because of McCarthyism? Could we, if not prohibited by state law, speak about the likelihood that these kinds of attacks were directed at Copland because he was homosexual? This characteristic of the piece’s historical context also includes the fact that McCarthyism is also referred to as the “Lavender Scare” because of the connection between the color lavender and homosexuals, who, as a group, were commonly persecuted under McCarthyism.

- (b) would we ask students to recognize that Copland’s creative output decreased during the period of these attacks—almost a decade?⁹

3. Important historical figures in music will be represented as composers, performers, conductors, vocalists, or instrumentalists.

Heterosexual norm: You may teach about Vivaldi’s affinity for writing for the student musicians of the orphanage at which he taught or how the friendship between Dvořák and Brahms was important to the development of Dvořák’s career, both commercially and artistically.

Homosexual dilemma: While performing music from *West Side Story*, will you acknowledge that (a) the most famous boy-girl love story in American musical theatre is the exclusive work of four gay American artists: Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins, and Stephen Sondheim? Can or will you acknowledge easily, openly, and—most important—accurately, that (b) Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson were part of “a circle of gay composers who were central to the 20th-century creation of an emblematic ‘American sound’ in concert music?”¹⁰

Not to include the contributions to music made by LGBT composers, conductors, educators, and performers might be more understandable if gay individuals had no role in the shaping of music history and, particularly, American

music. But contemporary musicologists conclude quite the opposite. Sources as mainstream as *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, within its entry “Gay and Lesbian Music,” documents “the struggles and sensibilities of homosexual people of the West that came out in their music, and of the contribution of homosexual men and women to the music profession.”¹¹ Influential people in art music, musical theatre, jazz, and popular music who were homosexual were of critical importance not only to the careers they had but also to the musical styles they represented or, in some cases, created. It is clear that the fact that these important musical figures were gay is not just an historical aside but an important part of the development of American concert or art music.¹²

Whether you agree with this viewpoint about the relationship between a composer’s life and her or his music, consider what a hetero-exclusive approach to musical information about music and musicians might mean to them and how it would benefit your students, both gay and straight.

- What would it mean to a student in your orchestra who, for the first time, hears a music teacher discuss Tchaikovsky’s personal torment, depression, and struggle with his homosexuality, including what it would mean to his father if he were (in modern terminology) outed?
- What might it mean to that student to have the very existence of same-sex feelings acknowledged by the inclusion of this information? How important would this be when done by his or her orchestra teacher—the one adult who loves music as much as he or she does and who occupies such an important place in his or her young life?

Continuing a Tradition

Music educators have a history of working to ensure that we provide a musical education that is in response to students’ abilities, interests, and musical backgrounds. For example, over

the past thirty years, we have worked hard to address the learning needs of students whose physical and cognitive capacities are outside the norm. Now, special-needs students are not seen as *others* in music classes and ensembles. We also act on a positive impulse to improve how we include and represent historical repertoire and lives of musicians who are female or musics from parts of the world remote from where we teach or from musical traditions that we were taught. We simply view these considerations as a part of our professional obligation so that our society will benefit from the musical, personal, and social assets we believe a comprehensive music education provides.

Sexual orientation in music education is not a new phenomenon. Isn’t it time to consider the beneficial presence of individuals—musicians, colleagues, and students—whose emotional, romantic, and physical attractions are to other human beings who happen to be of the same sex? Isn’t it time for us to acknowledge the ways we reinforce heterosexuality and the heterosexual lifestyle, and to examine how homophobia and heterocentrism bias our curricular content and the lives and work of LGBT music teachers? Isn’t it time we eliminate heterosexuality’s privileged place in our profession?

NOTES

1. J. G. Kosciw, E. M. Diaz, and E. A. Greytak, *2007 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation’s Schools* (New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2008), 15, 29, 30, 37.
2. M. P. Marshal, M. S. Friedman, R. Stall, K. King, J. Miles, M. A. Gold, et al., “Sexual Orientation and Adolescent Substance Use: A Meta-Analysis and Methodological Review,” *Addiction* 103, no. 8 (August 2008): 546–56.
3. Kosciw, Diaz, and Greytak, 15, 29, 37.
4. An anonymous moderated online discussion of these examples and of the questions posed in this article’s sidebar, “Do I Know What I Would Do When . . . ?” can be found at <http://groups.google.com/group/MusicEd-Orientation>.

5. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, *The State of the States (2004): A Policy Analysis of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Safer Schools Issues* (New York: Author, 2004), 3. Although this information is not current, the source of these data, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, is not aware of any laws passed since 2004 (e-mail correspondence with author, February 2009). These seven states are Alabama, Arizona, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah.
6. Kosciw, Diaz, and Greytak, 99.
7. Most states do not have laws protecting employees from discrimination based on real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, although states are passing such laws each year. See http://www.hrc.org/issues/workplace/equal_opportunity/8752.htm.
8. Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, *National Standards for Arts Education* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994). <http://www.menc.org/resources/view/national-standards-for-music-education>.
9. Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 157.
10. Hubbs, *The Queer Composition*, 4. Hubbs investigates the development of this American sound. She highlights that this identity was more social than sexual. Copland and the younger composers he influenced musically and personally shared a status that was both minority and closeted. Bonds of secrecy were part of the social, professional, and artistic connections that, along with other factors, contributed to the development of the modern American sound in classical music (see pp. 1–17).
11. Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood, “Gay and Lesbian Music,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Paragraph 1, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/42824> (accessed May 27, 2009).
12. See Philip E. Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Brett and Wood, “Gay and Lesbian Music”; Hubbs, *The Queer Composition*; and Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007).