

# POPULAR MUSIC EDUCATION: A Different Type of Musicianship

By Steve Giddings

Change is increasingly necessary in education in response to the constant changes in the world in which we live. Because of this need for change there are many courses in which a high school can offer to better serve its student body. I am currently completing a directed studies course at the University of Prince Edward Island in popular music education where I am designing a revolutionary new course to be offered in high schools focusing on the performance of popular music. This new course is not meant to replace the band program by any means but is instead intended to enhance the music program in schools as an addition to the band program, much like the way jazz bands or choirs do in some schools.

At the beginning of this year I started a band with my friends here at the music department at UPEI and we call ourselves The Afterhours. It was at first intended as a personal interest band but developed into a 'lab band' of sorts for my popular music education course where I learned more about playing rock music than I could from simply reading about it or from hearsay. I had played in rock bands before but this one was different because we are all good at what we do and work really well together. I will be referring to this group and other rock band experiences throughout the article.

## WHY POPULAR MUSIC?

There are many reasons why popular music should be an integral part of any music program. First of all, popular music is naturally more creative than concert band. In a rock band any given member is an arranger or co/composer for a given piece of music. As Boespflug (1999) puts it in his article *Popular Music and the Instrumental Ensemble* "the pop musician contributes directly to the musical material of a composition, influencing tone colour, melody, rhythm, harmony, and even structure, and thus becomes a co-arranger/composer as well as performer" (p. 33). With my experience in *The*

*Afterhours* I know that this is the truth. Our first original song was composed by our lead guitarist, and since its introduction to the band has gone through multiple stages of evolution to what it is today simply because the rest of the band members had input with regard to structure, harmony, melody and timbre. I've been a musician since grade 5, when I started playing violin and I have never been more creative than I have been in these past four or five months with the rock band. Not only this, pop music is improvisation and memory based, two aspects of musicianship that are often ignored in concert band.

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Rock music breeds versatility. Some of the more successful rock artists can not only play their principal instrument but other instruments within the band as well. In the 'classical' world of music there is rarely an incident where one would play a secondary instrument within the same ensemble. It does happen in pit orchestras and some jazz bands, but not in professional orchestras. With *The Afterhours*, our bassist also does some lead vocals in some songs while our rhythm guitarist/lead vocalist plays bass

in a couple of songs. I am the drummer and sometimes do lead vocals. The course that I designed, about which I will provide more detail below, has a section that requires the student to pick up a secondary or tertiary instrument.

Popular music is an aural tradition. Most popular musicians rely on their ears and memories more than classical musicians or even jazz musicians. Many famous rock musicians cannot read music but have fantastic ears. Playing popular music in the schools would put a much bigger emphasis on aural training and dictation which are very important skills that the traditional instrumental program often neglects. There were many instances during rehearsal with *The Afterhours* where we would mention a song that one of the guitarists wouldn't know. Because of the amazing ears of the members in the band, the songs were able to be learned quickly with surprising accuracy. All of us can read music, but there is no reason why we should and why we would have to with rock music.

Any rock group is chamber ensemble based. There is no conductor and no holes barred. The chamber ensemble experience of a rock band not only makes us better musicians but it gives us a sense of community and communication that we cannot get anywhere else in the world. In a rock band we play off each other instead of playing off the conductor. I know from experience that we feel the music more in a rock band than in any wind band or orchestra. It is a feeling which must be experienced, not taught: the course I designed sets everyone up to do just that.

As music educators we say that concert band is something that students cannot experience anywhere else. Rock music is to some degree the same way. There are kids who would get together and jam in their own garage band but there are some kids who would never have that opportunity either. Having this in the schools system will give those students an opportunity to meet other students with the same interests

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who would like to experience playing in a rock band. As well, having it in the school system would give many other students the opportunity to work with equipment such as recording technologies and PA systems that they would not be able to find anywhere else either due to financial situations or naivety. I don't think I would have ever gotten to use a PA system or record in a professional quality studio if I had not been part of a rock group.

Everyone likes music of some type and music is the one phenomenon that brings cultures together. If this is so then why are only a minority of select students in the high school music program? There is a sense of elitism around many music departments in public schools, which is part of the problem. Offering a popular music ensemble can help to eliminate this elitism. There *are* students in any school who love rock music and play guitar or drums at a very high level but are deprived of the music program because "this is not what we do here." What don't we do? Play music? The thing is that some of these students will go on to be very successful rock musicians, without any training from their school system. For those students who do not go on to be professional musicians it sickens me that they may never get to feel the satisfaction of playing music with other people. If the school system does not provide students with the skills that they need to succeed in the real world and experiences that one would not get anywhere else, who does? These are the students that would be interested in a popular music ensemble. After all, music is music is music is music.

Many music educators today seem to think that playing a band arrangement of their favourite Beatles medley is enough to say that they implemented popular music in their program. Sorry, this music is still wind band music no matter which way you cut it. Rock music is composed for 3 to 6 musicians with guitars, keyboards and drums, not 60 to 100 musicians with trumpets, clarinets, trombones, bassoons, tubas, flutes and French horns. One cannot capture either the style, timbre, nor 'feel' of the music with band transcription for the following reasons: there is a conductor, it is not written for those instruments, there is no vocal part, it is notated perfectly, there are no improvised solos, the musicians are not

forced to listen to one another, and the chamber quality is lost. As Cutietta (2004) notes, we should not encourage wind ensembles or orchestras to perform rock music any more than we should encourage synthesizer or rock ensembles to perform wind ensemble music..

All of this being said, I love concert band. I grew up with band in my life and I do not want to lose the band program any more than any other music educator. The band program is a different type of musical experience. Band focuses on different types of musicianship than what I am proposing. I do believe, however, that a course or

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ensemble focusing on popular music would be a healthy addition to any well developed or even beginning music program.

#### THE COURSE

The course that I have formulated is based on the 'learning by design' model where the teacher acts as a guide and the students act as teachers by learning from each other. The course is broken down into three 'course strands:' 1) Performance (students are organized into small bands), which includes 'Styles' and 'Technique;' 2) Musical Literacy, which includes 'Aural Skills/Lifting' and 'Theory;' and 3) Technology. As well, there is an independent project near the end of the course where students can become an expert on a specific topic

based on one of the course strands. Assessment is based on growth throughout the semester/year and is documented with recordings of a group of students or of individual students and with rubrics presented by the teacher for every performance or project. The students will grow tremendously in one strand of the course but will, in the process, show growth in the other two strands as well. The course outline is attached at the end of this article and explains the course strands in greater detail.

The independent project is intended to challenge a student in learning about something she or he does not already know, or something that takes the student beyond the basic expectations of the course. The options for this project are endless as long as they conform to one or more of the course strands. For example, a research paper on a pop artist will not suffice because it does not correspond with any of the course strands. However, a project that helps the student gain an understanding of how to use recording technology and sound editing programs in a more advanced way would display growth in the technology strand of the course. Other examples of an independent project include a project that has the student or group of students do their own non-school related performances or has the student or group of students compose a piece of music that combines two or more styles. The students are expected to compose at least one original piece within their group per semester/year, composing two or more can be proof of growth in the performance strand as well.

The requirements to get into this course are at least two years of private or group instruction on their primary instrument or by audition. Having this basic requirement for the course insures that the popular music performance course attracts students with an established musical skill set. We want just as good quality musicians in our popular ensemble as we do in our traditional ensembles.

In terms of gaining administrative approval, restricting the popular music performance course to students who demonstrate some pre-existing playing skills makes this course more appealing from a whole school perspective. If a beginning course in popular music per-

formance was offered it could take the interest away from other electives in other departments in the schools. If there is a course that attracts more students than any other possible elective, administrators tend to become skeptical. Having basic requirements helps to avoid this problem. In addition, the purpose of auditioning helps the teacher to find those extremely gifted students who have never had any formal training and give them the opportunity to play with others and to advance their musicianship.

The first few sessions of the course is set up like any jazz or concert band course. Students start off in the full group with teacher-led music making. Once initial expectations are established and ways of working as an ensemble musician together are explored the students break off into their smaller groups. Unlike most ensemble courses, this one is intended to have students in small, student-led groups for the vast majority of it. Starting the course in the large group has many benefits. First of all, it gives the students a chance to improvise as a group and get comfortable with improvising before they do it with their smaller groups. As well, it gives the students a chance to meet other people in the class so that they can decide who they would like to start a small group with. Starting them in the full group also gives the students a perspective on how playing with others in a rock setting works. I would also use it as a recruiting strategy for instruments that had not signed up for the course. For example, it is highly likely that there will be no bassist on the first day. Having the students in a group helps me to encourage a student or students to play bass but not giving them the feeling that they are stuck with that instrument. I would ask if anyone wanted to play bass for this song and then switch for the next song and it may take just one song to have them hooked.

### MUSICAL LITERACY IN POPULAR MUSIC

As you may notice, my course has a strand for musical literacy. Musical literacy in popular music is much different from that of the classical tradition of music. In the traditional ensemble a great emphasis is placed upon literacy as it pertains to reading notation. In popular music a greater emphasis is put on the ear and improvising, which is a part of musi-

cal literacy. Many teachers of traditional ensembles would frown on teaching a part by rote because the students "must learn how to read it themselves." We all know that many students in concert band in schools play by ear anyway so why not embrace their skill? In popular music it is OK to teach by rote because that is how the songs are learned and passed on: they are only written down into notation after they are composed and become popular. In the classical music world the music is learned and passed down by notation and that is why there is an emphasis on placed on it. Learning by ear constantly helps a student to recognize chords and pitches much easier than learning with notation would do. Lucy Green is a well known advocate and researcher of popular music and in her article *What Can Music Educators Learn from Popular Musicians?* she interviews a popular musician named Andy Brooks who puts it this way "Through [listening and copying], you don't just pick up what they're doing, you pick up techniques, you pick up common sorts of progressions and so forth. And nowadays I can hear a record, and I just know what's coming next. I know exactly what the notes are as well...I can listen, and I can pick out the pitch. I know that's a C major or whatever." (p. 233)

Some music educators would make the argument that one can play pop music by ear because it is so simple, whereas classical music is so complicated that it is very difficult to do so. This may have merit, but have you ever heard the song *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen? There is no way that anyone can call *Bohemian Rhapsody* a simplistic song, yet it is still learned by ear. One might say that classical music can be more complicated because it is written down and therefore some of it is almost impossible to learn by ear. The same can be said about some popular music, for example any of *Dream Theatre's* music.

The music theory that a popular musician requires is different, in some ways, from what classical musicians require. The other part of the musical literacy strand in my proposed course is theory and it has students becoming fluent in the functional language used by contemporary musicians. These are terms that are used to communicate within a group - such things as chorus, bridge, verse, intro,

outro, as well as issues involving key, rhythm, beat and metre. Using words like crescendo, piano, forte, and staccato is relatively pointless in any genre, why not say get louder, softly, loud and short? The reason we even teach these terms in a traditional ensemble is because that is the language that the composer uses to write things down. In a genre where there is no notation used and where most songs are composed without paper it is illogical to use such terms. However, for guitar, bass and keyboard knowing where individual notes are on their instrument would be stressed, as well as developing the understanding of basic chord structure/names (e.g. C major, D minor, E augmented). This would help rehearsals to run smoother and help students to be more functionally literate musicians.

In addition, the theory part of the musical literacy strand also delves into some notational issues with a focus on reading rhythm. Reading notes is not and should not be a requirement of the course, but understanding and reading rhythm is very important in this genre for many reasons. First, most popular music that is written for electric guitar and bass is tabulature (tab), which is a type of notation that uses a six line staff with each line representing a string on the guitar (four lines for bass). Numbers are placed on the strings to represent a fret, for example a 3 would represent the third fret. If the numbers are stacked on top of each other it is a chord and if they are separate it is a melody line. The tab that many students find on the internet gives no note values so the student must know the song to be able to play it properly. Published versions usually have a note value connected to it either by adding a stem and flag to the number on the six line staff or using the standard five-line notation above the written tab. For drummers, it is very important because drumming is rhythm and remembering all of the snare rudiments is much easier if they are written down: thus understanding rhythm notation is very important. Singers would be required to develop skills with solfa and rhythm reading so that they can learn to read lead sheets.

### REPERTOIRE

Unfortunately, there is no b100-b600 repertoire list for popular music like there is for concert band, which makes choosing repertoire for a popular music ensemble

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ble difficult. The course is designed so that the students learn from each other and the teacher learns from the students. For the teacher it is OK not being comfortable with songs that students bring to perform in their groups. I have found that student opinion on what is good usually seems to be a wonderful indication, as well as top 100 lists from the internet or a respected magazine such as *The Rolling Stone*. An activity that a teacher could try would be for the students to pick 5 of their favourite songs or albums and ask the students to bring these songs in so the teacher could see what it was they thought was good. From there, the teacher can use her or his own judgment to decide what is of good quality.

Most teachers are skeptical about using pop songs because of the message communicated in the lyrics. Popular music is music, after all, and it is not just about the poetry. The message may not be great in the lyrics but the music itself could be brilliant. This being said, no matter how good the song is, swearing and other obvious negative messages in the lyrics are unacceptable because the school system still teaches good morals and values. As long as there is no swearing or other blatant, unacceptable language I do not see a problem. Most, if not all, music from the top 100 or top 500 lists contain songs with no swearing at all, which also make these lists reliable sources for repertoire searching.

#### THE REALITY

In designing this course I found that there are some issues that can either become a problem or a potential problem. One of these issues is dealing with the vocalist. Training a vocalist properly is a daunting and challenging task for a non-vocalist, especially in the world of popular music where the voice is used in many different ways from the Bel Canto style of classical music. Many modern songs have aggressive vocals that if not done properly can permanently damage a student's vocal chords. Having an expert on pop singing come into the classroom is a strength for any teacher and can prevent students from injury in the future. Although this issue is not solved simply, many times it is very important to monitor the vocalists in this course. Melissa Cross is an expert in teaching aggressive vocals properly and is quite famous among the modern pop vocalists world. She can be seen on

YouTube and other such media giving lessons and interviews. This being said, I would be extremely uncomfortable coaching young vocalists with this technique unless I was an expert on it myself. This is why getting an expert in is a wonderful idea. I would also insist that the singers work on microphones and that all the musicians use proper ear plugs.

Most of us would feel uncomfortable teaching this course because we are not trained to teach it. In reality, the students will be doing most of the teaching with this course and what the teacher has to do is to facilitate and to monitor what goes on. As music educators we understand feel, rhythm, and ergonomics - that is half

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the battle. The rest is knowing enough about the instrument to be able to coach a student through the next level of performance or technique. Just pick up the instrument and noodle or go online and find some resources for coaching your students. YouTube is the best place for mini-lessons and coaching for these types of instruments. Even though our Music Education degree does not prepare us to teach all types of music it gives us the basis for teaching music - we just have to have an open mind and a desire to keep learning.

The course that I am proposing is intended to be implemented in a high school. While it could work in a junior

high setting, junior high students generally do not possess the level of maturity and work ethic that my proposed course will require.

#### CONCLUSION

There are many strong reasons why popular music should be offered as a performance credit in Canadian schools. The main reason is that it teaches other types of musical literacy and musicianship that many students do not get from playing in a traditional instrumental ensemble. Simply playing a band arrangement of a pop tune will not give the students the same feeling nor will it do justice to the song that is arranged. Good repertoire is out there, teachers just have to know where to find it. In reality, a course such as this one would appeal to more students in the school, reaching out to other students and in the end, increasing the quality, size and profile of the music program in schools. CME

#### References

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Steve is currently completing his fifth and final year of the conjoint Bachelor of Music Education degree at the University of Prince Edward Island where he studies trombone. Steve is lead trombone in the UPEI Jazz Ensemble, Second Chair trombone in the UPEI Wind Symphony, Second trombone in the Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra and just this past year was Second Chair in the National Youth Band of Canada. He has played trombone and percussion professionally with the Prince Edward Island Symphony Orchestra and has performed in many other Jazz and Classical groups around the Island. He is the drummer for the rock band The Afterhours and has played drums with other rock bands in the area. Steve is employed as a substitute teacher with the Eastern School Board on Prince Edward Island and is a trombone instructor at the Eastern School District Band Camp each summer. You can reach him at sgiddings@upe.ca with any comments or challenges.

## Popular Music Performance Course Outline

**Instructor:** Steve Giddings  
**Prerequisite:** at least 2 years of private or group instruction on primary instrument or by audition.

### Vision and Introduction

Throughout this course, students will be introduced to the real world skills and knowledge involved in becoming a professional musician. It will provide the student with the tools to succeed in the field. The course will cover such topics as lifting tunes, skills development, styles, and technology. As well, every student will have the opportunity to complete an independent project of their choice. This will give them an opportunity to be a 'specialist' in their field. Assessment will be based on growth in one or more strands of the course. It will be an ongoing process where students and teacher will learn from each other and grow in a portion of the course.

### Course Strands Performance

**a) Styles** – In small combos, students will display musicianship in at least four (4) different styles of popular music. This will be evaluated over a series of three to four performances which are organized throughout the semester/year. e.g.: Classic Rock, Metal, Punk, 60s Rock, or a combination of at least four others.

NOTE: all groups are highly encouraged to produce at least one original song per semester.

**b) Technique** – shows growth in their primary instrument. All students will be expected to take on a secondary or tertiary instrument which they will develop to being able to play that instrument within their ensemble. This will help the students to develop a sensitivity to the instrument and help the overall ensemble sound on their primary instrument.

### Technique Development:

**Drummers** – Will be challenged with rudiments, soloing and application within a song, limb independence and rhythm reading.

**Guitarists** – Will be challenged with scales, chords, soloing and application within a song and song writing.

**Bassists** – Will be challenged with scales, hand position, improvisation and slap bass techniques.

**Keyboardists** – Will be challenged with scales, chords, soloing and lead sheet reading.

**Vocalists** – Will develop vocal techniques appropriate for various styles, growls, song writing and back up vocal techniques.

**Horn Players** – Will be challenged with scales, stylistically appropriate playing techniques, tonguing and growling techniques, and improvisation.

### Suggested Secondary Instruments:

Drummers – Rhythm Guitar or Bass.

Lead Guitarist – Bass or Lead Vocals

Rhythm Guitarist – Bass or Drums

Bassist – Drums or Lead Guitar

Vocalists – Guitar, Drums or Keyboards

Keyboardists – Guitar or Bass

Horn Players – Guitar or Drums

NOTE: Students can learn any other instrument they choose, these are just suggestions that I would give.

### Musical Literacy

**a) Aural Skills/Lifting** – Students will be expected to lift a number of tunes throughout the course. As well, there will be times where the student is expected to lift a tune in class, without tabulature of any kind. This will help to develop the students' ear and become accustomed to some chord progressions or melodic motifs.

**b) Theory** – Students will be expected to become fluent performers using functional language used by contemporary musicians (e.g. Chorus, verse, bridge, etc.). As well, each musician will be encouraged to understand rhythm and his/her own notational issues:

**Guitar and Bass** – Challenged to understand rhythm as it pertains to tabulature and basic chord structure.

**Keyboards** – Challenged to understand basic triad and chord structure as it pertains to lead sheets.

**Vocals** – Challenged to understand solfa and sight sing simple melodies.

### Technology

Students will be introduced to standard recording equipment and performance technologies such as microphones, PA systems, mic-ing and wiring techniques, sound boards and sound editing programs. Students will be expected to record themselves as a group for assessment purposes and individually for a recording project. They will pick one song to record and record it like professional studio musicians, to have a very high quality CD to present.

### Independent Project:

The independent project can be done individually or in a group and can explore any one of the course strands covered in the course. The project should challenge the student and must be approved via a written proposal. If a student has their heart set on a project that is not part of the course strands it can be modified with the teachers help to fit the course strands and still be very close to what the student would like to do. Suggestions will be available if a student cannot come up with an idea on her or his own.

### Assessment:

There will be two major Assessment periods, and three if needed. The first is to give the students and teacher an idea of where the students are coming from. The last is to show proof of growth in any one of the course strands. The students will be expected to demonstrate growth in all parts of the course but there will be at least one course strand where the student shows the most growth. This may be assessed using rubrics on specific strands or a recording of the group to show ensemble and skills growth.

### Mark Break-down:

Performance – 40%

Musical Literacy – 20%

Technology – 20%

Independent Project – 20%