

THE PSYCHOLOGY
of
SCHOOL MUSIC TEACHING

James L. Mursell

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION
TEACHERS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

and

Mabelle Glenn

DIRECTOR OF MUSIC
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI



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Preface

This book has been prepared in the strong belief that a competent knowledge of the established results of psychological investigations in the field of music can be of the utmost value to the working music teacher, and can further the cause of music education in America. A great many splendid music teachers in our schools are doubtless conforming to psychological principles through instinct, or through a personal study of the child and his needs. We believe that such teachers will find comfort and reassurance in the knowledge that their opinions have a solid basis of established scientific fact, and that a complete survey of the psychology of music may open up for them avenues of thought and practical approach which they might not otherwise consider. Others, again, may not have fully realized the importance and value of a psychological attack upon the practical problems of musical development; and these, we believe, may gain a great deal from an understanding of the viewpoint here presented.

Since it is the primary aim of the book to help the working teacher, we have been careful to avoid the more technical aspects and terminology of music psychology. But at the same time we believe that we have brought practically all the relevant studies into contact with teaching situations in school music work. We have constantly sought to show exactly how psychological results may be applied in the classroom. At the same time, when a certain method is recommended, it should be understood that we use it chiefly as an illustration, and do not insist that it is the only possible way in which a psycho-

logical principle can be applied. Teaching is an art, and freely takes and uses scientific results for its own purposes. Psychology can never dictate any teaching procedure as right to the exclusion of all others, though it most certainly can indicate that some *kinds* of procedures are wrong and that other *kinds* of procedures are desirable. It is our hope that an understanding of the psychological outcomes and principles here explained will enable the working teacher to fashion for himself methods of procedure and treatment of superior excellence.

JAMES L. MURSELL

MABELLE GLENN

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

HOW PSYCHOLOGY CAN HELP THE SCHOOL MUSIC TEACHER

The chief aim of this book is to bring together all the findings of psychological research which bear on the work of the school music teacher, and to show how they can help in dealing with the practical problems to be faced. There is a great deal of such material, and it is of the highest practical interest and value. But very few people in the school music field know much about it. This is really not their fault, because the data do not exist in an available or usable shape. Much of the psychological research is reported in monographs or articles only to be found in the largest libraries. Even then such papers are apt to be so technical that without very special training it is hardly possible to get much edification from them. Much of the best work is available only in foreign languages. Furthermore, the findings are reported in piecemeal fashion, so that it is not enough to know a few of them. One must be familiar with practically all, since they correct and supplement one another, and need to be fitted together into a unified picture. Lastly, and in a way most important of all, the practical educational bearing of a technical psychological study is often not very obvious, and calls for a great deal of analysis if it is to be made clear.

It may help the reader to form a better idea of what is to be hoped from the following pages if we briefly indicate the fields of psychological research which are particularly inter-

esting and instructive for the school music teacher. First of all we should mention the extensive body of work in music psychology proper. A total well in advance of six hundred items of all kinds,—books, monographs, and articles—has been devoted to this topic in its various aspects. While not all of them are practically important for music education, a great many are; and these will be discussed and presented in the following pages, and listed in the bibliographies at the close of each chapter, so that anyone who wishes to go directly to the sources will find it easy to do so. In particular, we shall find authoritative material relating to ear training, to the development of rhythmic grasp, to the musical interests of children, to the inheritance of musical ability, to the foundations of appreciation, to the nature of singing, and to the great problem of measuring both innate musical capacity and musical achievement. Obviously everyone at all interested in teaching music properly ought to know what has been found out in these directions, and should understand the practical bearings of the research material. Then there is a great deal of work bearing on the learning process which cannot but be valuable for the educator. Within the last ten years many American psychologists have greatly revised their ideas about how we learn. This new work has a far closer relationship to the problems of the school music teacher than did the older psychology of learning. We shall try to show how it applies. Besides this there are a great many special fields in which psychology has brought results of much value and suggestiveness for music teaching. For instance, our whole approach to the vexed question of technique will be made much more intelligent if we know what psychology can tell us about the nature of motor skill and its acquisition. Or again, the reading of music is usually a primary concern in school work, and so the

data on the psychology of reading become valuable as a basis for wise, practical decisions. Then such topics as the psychology of individual differences, child psychology, and the psychology of feeling and emotion, have a relevancy to music education so evident that we need hardly point it out. Our task is to assemble all this material, to build it up into a coherent and understandable whole, and to indicate everywhere its relationship to educational practice.

To avoid possible misunderstanding and disappointment we should perhaps here indicate clearly one thing that psychology cannot do for the teacher. It cannot dictate a cut-and-dried method. Psychology can never tell the teacher that he must follow certain absolutely definite procedures in a certain absolutely definite order. As a matter of fact, it can do much better than this. It can formulate the principles upon which any and every good teaching procedure must depend. Methods in music education are often a snare and a delusion. Many school music teachers suppose that there is just one fixed right way of doing everything. This is absolutely false. But there are right ways and wrong ways, distinctions which psychology, and psychology alone, can make clear. The right procedure varies with the situation, with the child, and with the teacher. The ideal teacher is one who so clearly understands the mental processes he aims to guide and control that he can adapt his teaching techniques, often on the spur of the moment, to the particular human problem confronting him, and perhaps even invent new techniques there and then. Psychology can give vital help in such situations. It cannot furnish us with a ready-made method, suitable for all occasions; for as a matter of fact one of the chief things we can infer from the psychology of learning is that any ability or skill can always be taught and handled in a variety of ways.

WHY MANY MUSIC TEACHERS ARE SKEPTICAL OF SCIENCE

A great many music teachers, both in the studio and in the school fields, are inclined to be doubtful about the value of scientific findings for their work. Inasmuch as this book is virtually an application of psychological science to music teaching, it seems well to discuss the grounds for this attitude of distrust.

1. One reason is that many music teachers have come across applications of science to music which may be all right as science, but have very little value for a working musician and even less for a working teacher. For instance, a great deal of very fine research has been done on the physics of music. A really wonderful technique has been developed for photographing the fundamentals and overtones in various musical tones. Studies of the dynamics of the piano mechanism have been made. Of course there is endless investigation in the general field of acoustics. Or to turn to another field, a great deal is known about the anatomy and physiology of the human voice, and about the intricate system of muscles and nerves that control it. Many serious-minded music teachers have turned hopefully to such work as this, looking for help. And they have come away disappointed.

2. Yet another reason is that quite a great deal of what has masqueraded as science applied to music is really not science at all. For instance, one of the best known and most important books on piano technique combines the insight of a really great teacher with a most lamentable mass of nonsensical physics. Many of the things written in the name of applied psychology about vocal action are positively shocking. Now alchemy and astrology will not help the music teacher. Indeed they will be hindrances. In a great many cases this is just about what has been offered. Not being altogether gullible he

perceives that the so-called science simply does not apply, and so forms a prejudice against all science which is really deserved only by pseudo-science.

3. Then, too, a great deal of the perfectly sound psychology which school music teachers in training have studied is very remote indeed from their problems. A course in general psychology often has a peculiar prestige with students. They come into it expecting much. But they quickly find that it seems to have no relationship at all with the teaching problems they know they will have to face later on. Naturally the connection is really there, but teachers and textbook writers in psychology often do little to bring it out. The student in training can hardly be expected to supply what the experts have omitted. So psychology remains remote from practice in music education, and the teacher comes to feel that science can give little or no help.

4. Besides the reasons just given, and partly because of them, we find also a general feeling that music is creative and a matter of sentiment, while science is just dust and dry bones. Often the musician actually prides himself on being "not a scientist." This is really a very unfortunate attitude, and yet it is quite widely held. When we talk about the application of science to education, what we mean is simply that education ought to take account of, and base itself upon, ascertained fact. No one, however temperamental and high-souled he may be, can afford to fly in the face of the facts that relate to his own work. The notion that there is a mysterious antagonism between music and science is absurd. It comes from the idea that science is essentially an affair of strange formulae and incomprehensible, dull processes, whereas its real essence is simply the discovery of fact. When the musician attacks and condemns science, he is in the position of a person who climbs

out on a limb and then cuts it down behind him. He undermines his own chances.

There never was a time when music education more urgently needed the help that scientific psychology can give. School musicians, in particular, are facing a really breath-taking opportunity. Through their effective public presentation of their case they have virtually asked the American people to give music a chance in the schools. The answer has been very favorable. This is the true meaning of the great progress in school music in the last ten years. It has not yet achieved final success. But it has secured a challenging and enlarging opportunity. Just at this critical juncture, mechanical appliances have transformed the whole situation in the music field. The machine has done in music exactly what it has done in other fields. It has rendered various procedures and viewpoints obsolescent, and at the same time it has opened the way for new developments. We see the first, and of course the darker, side of the picture in such changes as the decline of the traditional *virtuoso* concert, the transformation of motion picture music, the elimination of the weaker private teacher, and the depleted enrollment in music schools whose chief aim is the production of near-*virtuosi*. But these things no more represent a total loss than did the misfortunes of the hand-weavers when the power loom came in. The great constructive lesson is that human beings ought not to attempt to compete with the machine on its own ground; and that there are values in musical performance quite extraneous to display, technique, and mechanics. In other words, the machine is forcing us to recapture intimacy and sincerity in music-making. It is forcing us to re-evaluate music from the ground up, and to recognize that the elocutionary emphasis which has dominated music education for so long is impossible. We are face to face with

an enormous job of musical reconstruction. Manifestly the day is with the teacher of music in the schools, who holds a position of unique strategic strength.

This is the reason why the work of the school music teacher is so significant today. It is also the reason why it is so important for this work to be founded on knowledge. Without an adequate background in psychology, the finest schemes for school music work lack solidity. Without psychological knowledge we have no authoritative basis for criticizing improper and inadequate methods and schemes. So we may define our task in the terms used by Pestalozzi long ago. It is our aim to psychologize music education.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The plan of presentation here adopted has grown out of this central aim. First we deal with the foundations of music education. These are found first of all in the musical nature of the child, and secondly in the processes of learning and teaching. It will be shown that everything here indicates appreciation as the necessary central aim of music education, using the term in its most inclusive sense. Next we deal with the basic mental processes or abilities which music education must set up, and we find that there are three, all intimately related,—namely, skill in hearing, grasp of rhythm, and mastery of the musical score. Thirdly, we turn to the problems of executant music, which we approach by way of general discussions of technique and expression, passing on to a more specific analysis of the problems of vocal and instrumental music. Lastly, we deal with the measurement of musical mindedness and capacity, the evaluation of teaching materials in the field of music, and the basic aims of music education.

PART ONE



The Foundations of Music Education

CHAPTER TWO

Music and the Child

The problem of this chapter is to determine the relationship of musical ability, or what is often called "musicality," to the whole mental and cultural life of the individual child. Some of our questions are the following: What sort of a person is the musical child? Does musical ability commonly go with high abilities in other fields? Is musical ability largely inherited, or is it something the child acquires through education? What kind of appeal does music naturally make to the child?

We shall not undertake here to give any formal definition of musicality or musical ability. Indeed it may never be possible to do this. But as we go on, its general nature will become apparent enough. Two points of basic practical importance, however, must here be made:

1. A person may be musical, that is, may possess high musicality, without any great executant or creative ability in music. This is clearly recognized in the research studies, and notably by Révész on the basis of his very careful investigation of the psychology of a musical prodigy. Here we have a conclusion involving the widest educational consequences. Specifically the following inferences are to be made. (*a*) We must not judge musicality merely on the basis of ability to perform. A single performance may be no better as an index of musicality than a single coached recitation of a poem would be of literary feeling. (*b*) Children lacking in executant ability or in creative ability may still be entirely suitable subjects for music education. This is true even with children who never show

any signs of becoming very good performers or creators of music. Such children may have a real talent for loving music and a keen sensitiveness to it; and they may reap immense benefit from proper musical opportunities. (c) The main emphasis in music education should be upon appreciation. This emphasis should penetrate the work in performance, which should aim at musical sincerity and feeling rather than technical perfection.

2. The possession of musicality in another can be quickly and certainly perceived by a musically sensitive judge. In a study made by one of the authors, teachers in a conservatory were asked to rate their students on musical ability and feeling, ignoring performance ability as far as they could. In some cases as many as five ratings were obtained for one student. There was a striking agreement in the ratings assigned students by the different teachers, all of whom worked quite independently. Clearly this seemed to show that judgments of musicality by these teachers were quite reliable. It often happens that the working teacher in school music has to try to pick out musical children for some purpose. Here, of course, we approach the whole subject of testing, which will be fully discussed later on. At this point, however, there are two things to say. (a) It is necessary for the music teacher to be a musically sensitive person. The musically stupid individual is very apt to be led away by unessentials when estimating musicality in another. The musical personality picks up all sorts of latent hints and small signs, ignores roughnesses due to poor technique and limited experience, and senses the underlying quality, often with uncanny accuracy. (b) If any sort of informal test is to be made, it should be a test of responsiveness to a genuine musical situation. For instance, in selecting children for a school choir, it is not enough to know that they