

**Unfinished Tracks: Listening for Change in Canadian Secondary Music Education
Through 25 Years of the *Canadian Music Educator***

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Author Note

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Abstract

Through a genealogical and contrapuntal reading (listening) to a 25-year discography of the *Canadian Music Educator*, I trace discontinuities, hidden grooves, and counter-lines that complicate familiar narratives of Canadian secondary music education. Read in counterpoint with my own journey as student, band director, popular music educator, and PhD researcher, the archive reveals both continuity and rupture: persistent calls for equity, creativity, and student agency; glimpses of practice that gesture toward change; and a growing insistence that justice and equity must be foundational, while leaving space for new approaches, including popular music programs, to emerge as sustainable models of change.

Reading 25 years of the *Canadian Music Educator (CME)* feels like dropping the needle on a sprawling discography, revealing iconic riffs, experimental side projects, and every so often a breakthrough track that shifts the artistic direction entirely. Parked at the intersection of insider and outsider—part listener, part producer—I am binge-listening to a quarter-century discourse of secondary music education in Canada, filtered through my history as a music student, high school band director, popular music educator, and now practitioner-researcher.

I grew up inside *CME*'s portrait of tradition, possibility, and resistance: first as an eager undergraduate music student searching for resources to support my coursework; later as a high school band director committed to excellence while also beginning to notice philosophical tensions within the large-ensemble rehearsal model; and most recently as an educator who stepped off the podium to create new high school popular music performance (PMP) courses where students' musical lives outside of school shape curriculum design. This professional and philosophical unfolding is the line I carry throughout my reading of the archive. The tensions I once noticed in practice resurface as echoes in *CME*'s pages, amplifying ongoing and entangled discussions of creativity, equity, legitimacy, and student agency, and revealing why popular music repeatedly emerges as a site of tension around what counts as valued musical knowledge and practice in schools. Approaching the archive in this way required a methodology attentive to patterns, nuance, tensions, and voices, including my own, unfolding across time.

Research Methodology

This study adopts the concept of bricolage as a research orientation. Bricolage, inspired by the writing of Claude Levi-Strauss and first articulated as a research orientation by Denzin and Lincoln (1994) and further developed by Kincheloe and Berry (2004), describes an orientation in which researchers draw reflexively from multiple theoretical perspectives and

interpretive tools to engage complex phenomena. Resisting standardized methods, bricoleurs embrace improvisation, actively constructing research methods from the tools at hand, while seeking conceptual clarification, which includes clarification of the researcher's position in the web of reality (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; White & Cooper, 2022).

Drawn from Denzin & Lincoln (2000), White & Cooper (2022) describe five types of research bricoleurs. Within this framework, my approach closely aligns with interpretive and theoretical bricolage. Interpretive bricoleurs recognize research as shaped by the researcher's positionality and historical contexts, while theoretical bricoleurs move between theoretical perspectives to generate layered readings of a phenomenon (White & Cooper, 2022).

Through a bricolage orientation, I engage with Foucauldian genealogy and contrapuntal reading as interpretive strategies. Following Foucault (1977), I resist searching for origins or imposing a straight-line narrative of progress; instead, I trace discontinuities and shifting or conflicting practices, and I listen closely to voices that reveal how what is commonly treated as the default—here, for example, the institutionalization and prioritization of the large-ensemble rehearsal model—is in fact contingent, messy, and contested (Noujain, 1989). To extend this approach, I draw inspiration from curriculum theorist Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, whose work on narrative inquiry and curriculum history demonstrates how contrapuntal readings can uncover polyphony within an archive (Ng-A-Fook, 2014). In Ng-A-Fook's work, contrapuntal reading places multiple narratives, histories, and lived experiences alongside one another, holding dominant and marginalized or overlooked stories together so that tensions, contradictions, and silences remain audible. Adapting this method, I place dominant refrains in Canadian secondary music education into counterpoint with lines of possibility, resistance, and change.

This deliberate mixing of qualitative methods and way of thinking shaped how I moved through the archive and selected the contributions discussed here. I did not approach this project as a systematic review, nor did I begin with a predetermined set of inclusion criteria. Consistent with a bricolage orientation, the contributions discussed in this paper emerged through sustained chronological engagement with the archive. I read 25 years of the journal in sequence, beginning with Fall 2000, initially reading full issues to situate myself within the range of conversations, practices, maintaining an annotated bibliography of readings in a research logbook which allowed for (re)immersing myself with the data. As patterns and tensions came into focus, I slightly narrowed my focus to primarily include editorials, Canadian Music Educators' Association (CMEA) presidential messages, philosophical writing, and contributions connected to secondary music education—particularly those engaging with issues of creativity, equity, and student agency.

Given the scope of the archive, it was neither possible nor desirable to account for every relevant contribution. Instead, this study asks: What conversations about music education surface, recede, and re-emerge across 25 years of the *Canadian Music Educator* journal, and what do these patterns reveal about shifting understandings of music knowledge, practice, and possibility in secondary music education in Canada? I aim to balance zooming in, highlighting contributions in conversation on a shared idea, with zooming out to surface related or adjacent threads woven throughout a line of thought, acknowledging the collective voices who have expressed this perspective in citation. As the paper unfolds, I occasionally situate my own evolving practice alongside the archive to reflect on how these conversations intersect with lived teaching contexts.

It is important to note that the *Canadian Music Educator* journal has served as the official publication of the Canadian Music Educators' Association /l'Association canadienne des éducateur·rice·s de musique since its first issue in June 1959 (Vol.1, No.1), functioning as a national venue for professional dialogue, research dissemination, and the exchange of ideas related to music education in Canada. Given this long history, the scope of this study focused specifically on the period between 2000 and 2025. This 25-year window was selected to allow for sustained and detailed engagement with the archive that remained manageable within the scope of this project, and as a secondary consideration, the timeframe mirrors my trajectory from being an eager grade 12 percussionist preparing for post-secondary music program auditions, to my current dual positionality of PhD student in Educational Studies and high school music teacher.

Setting the Tempo

It is the fall of 2000. Y2K has passed, burned CDs are teen currency, Jean Chrétien is prime minister of Canada, the twin towers are still standing, and Carlos Santana's comeback is topping the charts. Within the pages of *Canadian Music Educator* issue 42-1 (Fall 2000), the portrait of secondary music education feels familiar, even as contributors grapple with the implications of emerging technologies. Geoff Martin (2000) works to demystify the process of recording a school ensemble and transferring it onto a compact disc, while Kelly Demoline (2000) introduces a series on classroom technology by featuring programs including Band-in-a-Box and Musicator, framed as resources that allow students to work more independently. Beyond technology, contributions in these early issues reflect a professional discourse focused on sustaining or improving music programs built on traditional large-ensemble structures and ongoing advocacy justifying their place within schools. Regular columnists offer pedagogical

advice and lesson plans for string classes, choir, wind band, and—what I found somewhat surprisingly—guitar classes and steel band programs. These teacher-forward pieces emphasize practicality and classroom application, while editorials and other academic contributions tend to focus on broader philosophical concerns, particularly the rationale for music education and the ongoing need for advocacy.

Positioning Popular Music

Against this backdrop, the music that students listen to outside of school is barely audible and firmly positioned within school programs as functional. A close listen to the archive in the early 2000s reveals two patterns: popular music being treated either as recruitment or reinforcement. Several teachers share strategies for increasing student engagement and reinforcing musical concepts through strategic use of popular music; Bill Quinn (2004) recommends using rap music as a tool to hold teenagers' interest in choir, bypassing its expressive power in favor of reinforcing students' sense of rhythm and pitch; Jan Szot (2003) adapts pop and fiddle tunes to motivate string students to engage in technical drills; Mark Crawford (2000) advocates sprinkling in rock excerpts to keep reluctant guitar students practicing their classical etudes. In each case, popular music is positioned as a means to support existing curricular priorities rather than allowed to function as a central or independent form of musical practice. Here, popular music was heard but not yet listened to.

Other contributors widen the conversation by turning attention to the hierarchies embedded within ways of framing music education that privilege Western European traditions over other musical practices. Eleanor Stublely (2000) bluntly identifies the cost of excluding non-Western practices, insisting that by elevating the European canon, music education has denied both the multicultural reality of Canadian society and the diverse achievements that have shaped

European culture itself. After exploring definitions of classical and popular music, Stublely writes: "Whatever the specific orientation, the definitions include and exclude in ways that radically affect both the value attached to the music and the way in which that music is experienced"(2000, p. 5). She calls for listening beyond binaries of "classical" and "popular," and instead attending to "competing and contradictory voices, some of which may have never been heard before."

Stublely's position stands in sharp contrast to beloved arts education advocate Elliot Eisner's suggestion that students' musical tastes can be used as a bridge to Western-European, musical values. In his keynote address at ISME 2000, Eisner insists that teachers need to know where a student is at musically to find places at which to begin: "Do not disregard what students now respond to musically. Can you use their responses to their contemporary music as a bridge to other musical values? How can opportunities be provided for students to talk about the music they like and how can music teachers use what students say to deepen and broaden their responses to music"(2000, p. 15).

While it's beyond the scope of this article to fully unpack the underlying assumptions and biases—both explicit and implicit—captured in the jarring philosophical differences between Stublely and Eisner placed 'in conversation' via their appearance in the same issue, when I look back on this decades later, I feel a deep sense of embarrassment for not having developed the critical consciousness needed to recognize this opposition in real time. I recognize how this 'conversation' feels more loaded—and, in many ways, 'louder'—in today's context, and how much more visible its assumptions are now.

Around the same time, co-editor Lee Bartel (2001b), whose work would become a defining presence in the journal and in Canadian music education more broadly, critiques the

dominance of the large-ensemble rehearsal model, in which music classes outside of band, orchestra, and choir are consistently framed as “alternatives,” and never positioned as equal counterparts. From this vantage, the dismissive treatment of popular music—sometimes derided as “fluff” or even labeled as a dangerous subculture that needs containment—is less about the music itself than about protecting a hierarchy of legitimacy (Bradley, 2000; McCarthy, 2001).

In this conversation around hierarchy and exclusion, June Countryman’s (2005) contribution stands apart. Drawing on Elizabeth Campbell’s *The Ethical Teacher*, Countryman presses educators to see repertoire as an ethical choice, asking us to consider the extent to which we are truly reaching all students, and what responsibility we have to include music that reflects our students’ lived identities. Citing artists including k-os and Victor Wooten alongside Bach, Countryman argues that students “have a right to see their identity affirmed in the materials of the curriculum.” She highlights the importance of representation, positioning inclusion of diverse perspectives and musical practices as an “ethic of rights and ethic of care”, and illuminating that the choices we make as music teachers are not neutral and deserve careful consideration.

Nancy Dawe (2001), Eleanor Stublely (2001), Matthew Tran-Adams (2005, 2006a, 2006b), and Roberta Lamb (2005) bookend this early 2000s conversation on equity and ethical responsibility, bringing critical and diverse perspectives that resonate with Countryman’s ethics of care by drawing attention to power and access in the music classroom. Explored through different lenses, including feminist and anti-racist readings, they each examine questions on who feels safe, whose repertoire is centered, and whose musical cultures are rendered invisible. Within this broader conversation, a clear line emerges that positions equity and creativity as fundamentally intertwined.

Just as Stubley, Countryman, and Bartel's ideas in particular feel ahead of their time when read two decades later, I reflect upon my own experience as a music student around this time, and now see clearly how my junior high band teacher, Peter Gallant, used popular music to both recruit beginners and, more broadly, to reimagine junior high instrumental music programs. Keeping the concert band at the center, Mr. Gallant also created opportunities for students to perform in small popular-music ensembles built around vocalists or instrumental soloists accompanied by a rhythm section. Looking back, I recognize how progressive this approach was for the time and view my participation in those small ensembles as pivotal experiences that quietly shaped my understanding of what could belong within school music programs.

Conversations on Creativity

Intertwined with limited, and sometimes heated mention of popular music practices, broader philosophical issues of legitimacy, and the emergence of ethical repertoire selection and representation, academics and co-editors begin to complicate the dominance of the performance-driven large-ensemble rehearsal model through increased emphasis on creativity and student agency in the secondary music classroom (Bartel, 2001a; Fratia, 2001; Willingham, 2001). One of the earliest signals comes from Betty-Anne Younker (2000), who advocates for composition as a means of fostering student creativity and musical independence. What I find striking is not only her conclusion—that composing leads to greater student ownership and deeper engagement in self-questioning—but her willingness to imagine a classroom with reconfigured roles for both teacher and students that balances teacher guidance with increased student agency with the teacher acting more as a coach or facilitator. Younker asks: “What activities do we devise, questions do we ask, and strategies do we suggest without being dictatorial? Can this kind of environment be in a school structure?” (2000). This rethinking of authority aligns with Lee

Bartel's (2004, 2005) repeated calls for teachers to shift their roles from directing musical decision-making toward intentionally creating conditions that support student agency. Read this way, Younker's article, in alignment with Bartel's position, functions as an early blueprint for classrooms where students have a more active role in directing their learning, alongside the careful and care-filled guidance of a music teacher. From within my own practice, this foreshadows the ongoing cognitive conflict involved with implementing newly designed popular music performance courses, as I asked myself how much structure was enough, when to intervene with advice, and how to leave space for students to authentically move through the creative process while still supporting the skill development needed to bring their ideas to life.

Honing in on creativity, Timothy Sullivan's (2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b) four-part series on creativity enters this conversation by asking a deceptively simple question: is "creativity and music education" an oxymoron? He situates this tension within a traditional model shaped by teacher-directed instruction, sequential skill development, and performance-driven priorities, where creativity is often treated as something to be added later, if time allows. While naming familiar constraints—including time, classroom management, and performance expectations—he also surfaces a more foundational challenge: creativity is not easily defined or measured, so how do we recognize it, encourage it, or teach it with confidence?

Ben Bolden (2006)—writing as a graduate student long before his future regular contributions and service as interim editor of *CME*—echoes Younker's advocacy for composition and Sullivan's observation of creative practices as non-essential, while more directly challenging the structures that keep creativity at the margins by addressing music education's longstanding prioritization of replication over generation. When teaching is driven primarily by preparing ensembles for public performance, opportunities for students to create

their own music are often limited, and many teachers report feeling uncertain or insecure in their ability to support student composition. In this respect, Bolden argues that music education has lagged behind other arts subjects, including visual art and drama, where creativity and personal expression are more consistently embedded in classroom practice and students are regularly invited to express their own personal creativity through original, self-representative work.

The thread of teacher insecurity identified by Bolden's writing can be traced back a few years earlier to Francine Morin's (2000) advocacy for revising teacher-preparation curriculum to use inquiry as the instructional paradigm driving the B.Ed. program. Morin insists that creativity cannot be reduced to a curricular checkbox; it must be lived and embodied by preservice and practicing educators. Through reflecting on challenges preservice teachers faced when implementing an inquiry approach in a first-year curriculum and instruction course, Morin argues the most significant barrier is not curriculum design but teacher disposition. Unless teachers wrestle with their own insecurities, take creative risks, and cultivate humility, they cannot authentically foster creativity in students. This framing, placed alongside Bolden and Younker, exposes a deeper contrapuntal tension that will continue to resonate throughout the archive: the very people tasked with leading classrooms may be the least prepared to inhabit the vulnerability and openness that creativity demands. Morin's call to unmask authority and model humility is echoed later in narratives of resistance from preservice teachers asked to engage in improvisation exercises free of structured guidelines, or challenged to embrace improvisation as a pathway for exploring creative musical ideas in the music classroom (Fratia, 2002; Monk, 2010a, 2010b; Steele, 2004).

Zooming out to look more broadly at the themes emerging in the early-mid 2000s, I see a field already grappling with tensions that lie within deeper structures that shape secondary music

education. Calls for increased creativity, student agency, and equity repeatedly surface from within a system still firmly anchored to the large-ensemble rehearsal model. The result is a persistent tension: while alternative, more inclusive pedagogical visions are articulated with clarity and conviction, they are rarely centered. It is within this gap between pedagogical possibility and institutional positioning that musical practices outside band, orchestra, and choir come to be framed as “alternatives,” or in the spirit of embracing this archival listening, pedagogical B-sides.

Pedagogical “B-sides”

Alongside the main rotation of large-ensemble discourse, *CME*'s pages also spin “B-sides”: alternative pathways for making music, embodying aspects of the calls for change while remaining tethered, at least somewhat, to tradition. Guitar classes, jazz ensembles, chamber ensembles, and steel bands are primarily framed as side projects or extras—enticing opportunities to recruit, enrich, or energize the main program, typically band, choir, and/or orchestra. These side projects are embedded with music practices that align with Younker's vision for a reimagined music classroom that fosters diverse musical practices and increased student agency, including an emphasis on aural learning, independence, improvisation, and embracing a variety of popular or contemporary styles,

Contributions focused on jazz ensembles and guitar classes reveal how musical practices rooted in aural and popular traditions are frequently absorbed into Eurocentric curricular frameworks once they enter school settings. Writing about his high school guitar classes, regular columnist Randy Haley (2007) describes the guitar as versatile, inexpensive, easy to learn, and widely relevant across genres. Paradoxically, the curriculum he outlines remains grounded in Western art-music traditions, prioritizing standard notation in ways that constrain how the

guitar's most distinctive and culturally embedded practices are taken up in the classroom. Similarly, jazz educator Paul Tynan (2007) acknowledges jazz as "an aural tradition," while simultaneously insisting that in school ensembles "the ability to read is a must for all musicians and can never be started too early" (2007). Taken together, these examples illustrate a familiar pattern: even when elements of contemporary musical traditions are invited into secondary programs, they are often reshaped to fit existing Eurocentric pedagogical norms. In many ways, this marginalization of popular music practices, often referred to as informal music learning practices through the work of Lucy Green (2002), is woven together with the earlier positioning of popular music as functional.

Adjacent musical opportunities such, as chamber ensembles and steel bands, further complicate this picture. Wind band specialist Denise Grant (2007) emphasizes chamber music's value for developing increased student accountability, independence, and collaboration, positioning small ensembles as spaces where students take greater initiative with less direct teacher oversight. While this approach partially resonates with calls for greater student agency in music programs, the rationale for chamber music is often framed in terms of how effectively these competencies transfer back to the large-ensemble rehearsal. From an equity standpoint, it is also worth noting that opportunities to participate in small ensembles are commonly reserved for advanced students, often linked to music festivals or special invitations to perform for events, and treated as enrichment. This observation isn't intended to devalue or criticize chamber music, but rather, continue a thread of examining the limited presence of musical practices that more closely resemble students' musical lives outside the school.

By contrast, steel bands, as situated within Canadian schools, emerge as a unique entanglement of Afro-Caribbean origins fused with Eurocentric ensemble practices. Joe Cullen, a

Toronto-based teacher and frequent contributor, describes steel bands as “one of the most popular and exciting options” for schools (2000b, p. 29) because of their accessibility and immediate appeal to students. At the same time, he acknowledges ongoing tensions around the use of standard notation. In Trinidad, steel band music is traditionally learned by ear, deeply rooted in oral and aural traditions where musicians learn primarily through listening, imitation, and repetition (Menge, 2019).

Within school settings, Cullen explains that many ensembles use a hybrid approach: directors provide standard scores as roadmaps, while students who do not already read standard notation or aren't yet fluent in reading often rely on aural learning or develop personal notation systems, decoding the standard notation in a way that will allow them to more quickly be able to follow along (2000a, 2001). This blending of learning styles resonates with my own experience directing the University of Minnesota Steel Band as a graduate student in 2006, where non-music majors, many with limited musical experience, and classically trained students played side by side. Leading an ensemble that embraced multiple literacies—from standard notations to aural learning—was one of my first opportunities to step outside the bounds of my formal training. Still, at that time, the steel band I directed remained an outlier compared to the central art-music ensembles.

Cullen frames school steel bands in much the same way, catering his writing to an audience of band directors and promoting the ensemble as an alternative or supplement to existing programming. While steel bands remain relatively localized within Canadian school music programs, Cullen's sustained contributions across many years elevate this pathway into a noticeable thread within *CME*'s discourse—one that offers a compelling hybrid between aural traditions and the more common, standard-notation-driven large-ensemble rehearsal model

(2005, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013). Furthermore, steel bands are significant for what they reveal about cultural relevance and the concessions required for musical practices positioned outside the Western European canon to survive within existing curricular frameworks. These pedagogical B-sides reveal how close change has always been, even when kept structurally on the sidelines.

Improvising Within the Changes

Across the mid-2000s and early 2010s, discussions of creative practices, particularly improvisation and composition, become more frequent and more sustained within *CME*. While these conversations do not displace the centering of large-ensemble performance models, they signal an expanding understanding of what school music might include. Writing on these areas continues to lean on familiar forms of scaffolding pedagogical strategies situated within familiar structures, such as jazz ensembles and courses connected to concert band programs. Jazz improvisation pedagogy is often framed through theory-driven drills encouraging students to better learn how to play “within the changes” of particular modes and chord progressions, and composition remains folded into short projects in concert band class.

Still, *cracks in the frame of tradition begin to widen*. Beginning in articles in 2007, students are now composing by layering beats with software, creating tracks that blur the line between classroom exercises and music production (Bolden, 2007) . At the same time, improvisation is increasingly positioned as creative musical exploration and risk-taking rather than solely as a technical skill to be mastered (Haley, 2008, 2009; Sullivan, 2006b). Moving far outside traditional parameters, free improvisation enters the conversation, including examples drawn from Sun Ra’s Arkestra, positioning improvisation as a practice of self-expression and collective freedom through “joyful noise” (Crandell & Lorenzino, 2013). Across these perspectives emerging and experimental creative practices complicate the narrative of creativity

as an essential learning area, pointing instead to its potential as a site of deeper musical, personal, and social engagement.

Creativity Through Improvisation and Composition

Within this expanding conversation, the work of Augusto Monk and Ben Bolden offers particularly clear insight into what embracing creativity in school music might require from both students and teachers. Monk's writing on improvisation (2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) approaches creativity as a cognitive and interpersonal practice. Drawing on his experience as an educator shaped by diverse cultural and educational contexts, Monk identifies musical decision-making, anticipation, and structural awareness as the core mental processes of improvising. Through his work teaching music education majors, he confronts the resistance and barriers many preservice teachers experience when asked to engage in creative musical practices. This resistance echoes the observations presented earlier in Francine Morin's (2000) work to center inquiry and Ben Bolden's (2006) discussion of teacher uncertainty as a barrier to implementing more composition into the curriculum; it is rooted in years of standard-notation-driven training that deprioritizes skills such as self-cuing, responding to verbal cues, feeling time internally, and adjusting to an ensemble without a conductor.

Monk's pedagogical strategies emphasize careful scaffolding, including the use of specific exercises and techniques to build confidence in improvising, such as altering a single note within a motive, mentally preparing a transposition, and building musical ideas step by step. Such exercises position improvisation as teachable and accessible rather than elusive, reserved for the musically gifted, or confined to the study and performance of jazz. Reading Monk's work is both validating and frustrating: validating, because these very skills he identifies are the ones I observe my popular music students developing organically, supported by strategic coaching;

frustrating, because his analysis confirms how many students progress through years of formal study without learning to make music independently. I recognize this gap in my own experience as well. As a high school student playing keyboard in jazz band, I was so anxious about improvising that I secretly memorized solo ideas lifted from professional recordings, crafting them into a single recycled solo I used each time we performed a particular piece. In retrospect, it was an effective strategy, but one that allowed me to avoid fully engaging in creating spontaneous musical ideas.

If Monk diagnoses what has been stripped away by formal, theory-driven approaches to improvisation, Bolden (2007) highlights what becomes possible when creative authority is restored to students. His mid-2000s research follows high school teachers as they experiment with composition in their classrooms. Rather than describing a fixed procedure with specific criteria for composition, Bolden documents teachers stepping back and exploring a spectrum of guidance that allows for increased creative freedom, involving setting a limited range of constraints, posing questions, offering suggestions, and sometimes stepping back entirely. What emerges is a pedagogy of trust, one in which students' identities and musical interests shape the creative process, and teachers recalibrate their roles from directors to facilitators.

The music that students produce under these conditions is telling. Much of the students' work blurs or even transcends the boundaries of their school exposure to Western art music, moving towards songwriting, beat-making, and technology-based production that is heavily inspired by the music they frequently listen to. The teachers working with Bolden report astonishment at how quickly students find success, how strongly peers affirm one another, and how compositions extend beyond the classroom into performance at various school events, even gaining community recognition in public showcases.

Placed contrapuntally, Monk and Bolden illuminate two sides of the same conversation about creativity. Monk identifies musicianship gaps resulting from students whose backgrounds lie firmly in Western art-music-based pedagogy, while Bolden demonstrates what becomes possible when students are trusted to explore and develop their own creative voices. Around them, other contributors add texture and extend this conversation, including Steve Giddings's (2013) who frames improvisation as creative exploration and Crandell and Lorenzino's (2013) celebration of free improvisation. Together, these voices unsettle the dominance of reproduction and nudge secondary music education closer to embracing student agency and more authentic forms of creative expression.

Popular Music as Curriculum

While discussions of creativity-focused approaches to improvisation and composition that embrace student agency challenged reproduction-centered models, a more explicit shift toward focusing on popular music and informal music-learning practices begins to emerge. A notable turning point for popular music discourse is in *CME*'s Spring 2008 issue (49-3), where four contributions explicitly engage with popular music, or, more broadly, with the cost of excluding students' musical identities under authoritarian frameworks. Read together alongside extended conversations through letters to the editor in the following issue as a response to these articles, the four featured articles in this issue mark a departure from earlier, more peripheral treatments of popular music, bringing popular music practices into direct conversation with questions of curriculum, pedagogy, and legitimacy in secondary music education.

Lee Willingham (2008) sets the stage in his editorial as he observes that teacher candidates often cling to the system that shaped them: high-level performance of the Western canon with minimal variation, tried-and-tested large-ensemble rehearsal techniques, and Western

art-music theory and history staunchly gatekeeping legitimacy. He expands on previously discussed issues of resistance by pressing the point that if we truly believe “music is for all” (2008, p. 2), then popular music, more specifically the musical interests and informal music practices of students’ musical culture outside of school, belongs in our classrooms. Change in secondary music education frameworks, Willingham suggests, will come either through transformative experiences that disrupt teachers’ own assumptions or out of necessity when shrinking programs force a reimagining.

Alongside this call, Steve Giddings (2008), a preservice teacher at the time, shares a directed-studies project designing a popular-music-based high school class built on informal learning practices as described by Lucy Green (2002). Giddings imagines high school rock bands functioning as chamber ensembles, with each member an arranger or co-composer; musicianship grounded in ear, memory, and functional theory rather than exhaustive reliance on standard notation; versatility across instruments; and technology woven into daily practice, gesturing toward an entirely new approach to developing musicianship in school programs. By this point, the question isn’t whether popular music belongs, but whether schools will reimagine courses to meet the realities of how music is lived and created today.

Carrying the line forward, Sarah Morrison’s (2008) essay reveals another layer of what becomes possible when students’ musical lives outside school are taken seriously. She describes using popular music as a lens for addressing racism, including protest songs of the American Civil Rights Movement alongside student-driven projects in the One World Youth Arts Project, a Toronto-based program focused on providing opportunities for young people from across the city to create music in meaningful, relevant ways, particularly through music production. In a social-justice-inspired environment, popular music drives dialogue, creativity, and access.

Still within the same issue, Amanda Byrd's (2008) contribution arrives with a sharper edge: a personal reflection on how her high school music program, steeped in authoritarian rehearsal culture and a reliance on a canon of repertoire, left students disengaged, even miserable, clinging to their love of music and community to motivate continued involvement. Her words struck a nerve. The following issue's letters spark a heated debate; some readers applaud her candor, while others revolt, framing her honesty in this personal reflection as unfair and unethical. The intensity of the response reveals how unsettling it is for the profession to confront its own blind spots, and how quickly discomfort turns to defensiveness when long-standing traditions are questioned.

Heard together, these voices don't agree on every note, but they make the issue feel like a genuine pivot. Popular music emerges as curriculum, critique, and cultural practice. Even the resistance, including bristling letters to the editor and the reaffirmations of centering Western art-music traditions in subsequent issues, helps underscore how charged and consequential the conversations on expanding and modernizing school music programs has become in 2008. Like a breakthrough track on a record, the contributor perspectives found within *CME*'s Spring 2008 issue reframe everything that came before and set new expectations for what might follow.

The Rising Chorus

By the late 2010s, Drake had transitioned from Degrassi to superstar, Jeremy Dutcher had just won the Polaris Prize for re-centering Indigenous language through song, and TikTok was redefining how teenagers consume and create music. Within the *CME* archive, questions of creativity, agency, equity, and legitimacy are increasing in both volume and frequency. As a result, the pressure for secondary music education to respond to shifting musical practices and values is rising.

Steve Giddings's steady contributions as a popular music education columnist normalize the inclusion of popular music education pedagogy within *CME*'s discourse. In his writing, practices like learning by ear, copying, and jamming are described as fundamental approaches to musical learning. Giddings situates these practices through describing initiatives like a "flex music" ensemble for a small group of elementary students identified as at-risk. In partnership with another staff member, this alternative ensemble offers insight into using popular music outside of music class to create conditions for student engagement (2018b, 2019a, 2019b; Giddings & Burgess, 2019).

Across the archive, this growing recognition of popular music as more than a motivational tool becomes increasingly audible, alongside an increased presence in other diverse musical practices. In 2019, *CME* editor Charlene Ryan (2019) provides an overview of this shifting musical education landscape:

While most music teachers are still trained as classical musicians to teach traditional ensembles and courses, the field is opening up and so are the options for school music programs. Rock band classes are thriving side by side with concert bands, Indigenous musicians are sought out for their specialized expertise to share with general music classes and students are composing impressive works with or without skills in reading lines and dots on a page. I saw this not to disparage old ways but rather to encourage you to think about how your own teaching has evolved to meet the needs of Canadian children and youth. (p.17)

Around this same time, scholars caution that students must be prepared for the world they inhabit rather than the one their teachers inherited advocating for the inclusion of more diverse and inclusive musical practices, and contributors continue to argue that simply adding popular

arrangements to concert band programs is insufficient for meaningfully engaging with popular music and other diverse musical practices (Adderley, 2019; Andrews, 2020; Coker, 2018; Ryan, 2019).

Popular Music-Based Frameworks Emerge

What emerges is a growing consensus for offering dedicated courses in popular music, grounded in the practices students already use outside of school (Adderley, 2019; Andrews, 2020; Farish, 2009; Ryan, 2019). This advocacy did not appear overnight, nor has it coalesced into a single, sustainable response. Milestones such as the introduction of the UK program Musical Futures in select regions of Canada marked an important bridge from theory to classroom practice through its emphasis on informal learning practices, though its reach has remained limited in Canada both in implementation and in the broader discourse of secondary music education in *CME* (Heckel, 2017; “Musical Futures,” 2011; O’Neill & Bessflug, 2011; Wright et al., 2012).

Beyond Musical Futures, contributors increasingly advocate for authentic engagement with popular music practices. Songwriting and beat-making using music production software are increasingly positioned as valued practices which deserve dedicated courses in school programs, while recording technologies, from phone memos to digital audio workstations (DAWs), are recognized as meaningful tools for reflection and creation (Brown, 2013; Farish, 2011; Murphy, 2012). Interviews with professional contemporary musicians, including Prince Edward Island’s Tim Chaisson and Meaghan Blanchard, bring a real-world lens, highlighting a disconnect between the rich, community-based musical experiences that shaped them and the curriculum they encountered in their public-school music programs. In doing so, these rich accounts from Canadian artists underscore the importance of valuing living musical practices and community

connections, and point to missed opportunities within school programs to support pathways into contemporary musical careers (Giddings, 2018a; Haley, 2010; O'Donnell & MacRae, 2013).

Insight Through Teacher Reflection

This push for structural change is consistently accompanied by narratives of teachers' sharing their emotional and professional experiences as they attempt to diverge from long-standing rehearsal-centered norms. Across the archive, contributors acknowledge how disorienting it can be to loosen control in classrooms. Many admit they teach as they were taught, struggling to unlearn deeply embedded reflexes; as a result, teacher education repeatedly emerges as a critical site where preservice teachers must wrestle with bias, fear, and creativity or risk perpetuating the cycle, resurfacing the ongoing conversation presented earlier in this article that discusses a connection between teacher preparation and resistance to modeling creative practice for their students (Bolden, 2007; Carlisle, 2009; Kim, 2016).

Within this expanding body of reflexive narrative writing, several teachers describe their fear of improvisation, unease in stepping back from the podium, and vulnerability in admitting they do not have all the answers (Dawe, 2016; Gerrits, 2010; Phillips, 2011; Sirek, 2016). Others frame humility as essential, urging educators to resist using authority as their default model and instead cultivate dialogic practices where student voice holds genuine space, also recognizing this can be a very unsettling and challenging process (Cho, 2010; Wright et al., 2012).

Neurodivergent and more culturally inclusive perspectives further challenge narrow definitions of rigour, adding depth to the suggestion that learning driven by students' intrinsic motivation—in many cases embracing informal music practices and popular musical styles—that is supported by responsive teacher facilitation, can be more meaningful than tightly controlled, direct instruction (Coker, 2018; Nolan, 2020; Snell, 2015; Snell & Marsella, 2020).

A particularly powerful reflection on the limitations of solely relying on classical training to meet the needs of a diversifying high school program in 2018 comes from music teacher Xilan (Lindsey) Wen (2018). A high-achieving, classically trained musician, Wen describes realizing that her traditional, Westernized education left her unequipped to welcome student's musical practices outside of school into the classroom. She raises important observations about why many classically trained students abandon music after years of work dedicated to high-level certification, such as Royal Conservatory of Music examinations. Wen speculates, based on her lived experience and observations as an educator, that one's joy for music-making diminishes the longer she spends inside rigid structures. Her willingness to voice this fear, that perhaps her own inhibitions are the greatest barrier to her students' creativity, exemplifies the humility required to reimagine and expand one's teaching practice. Wen reframes change as *unlearning* rather than *upgrading*, a shift that deeply resonates with my own pedagogical and philosophical unfolding and opens directly onto Sara Joy's (2021) pandemic-era call to embrace the borderland as a pedagogy of becoming.

I feel that the most poignant articulation of this emotional terrain comes from Sara Joy (2021), who captures the disorientation of teaching amid COVID and global unrest as both rupture and opportunity. She presses teachers to occupy the "borderland" between comfort and stagnation, and to understand identity as a process of continual becoming rather than a fixed endpoint, an idea inspired by Janet Alsup's writing on teacher identity (2018). Joy's reflection struck a chord with me, particularly as I realized that her writing coincided with a pivotal time in my teaching career. At the height of my career as a high school band director, I began the unsettling, chaotic work of field-testing a brand-new (unfinished) popular music performance curriculum—an area far removed from my self-described strengths as both a musician and

educator. Truthfully, I felt like an imposter. The first PMP class offered at my high school was in the fall of 2020, and while COVID did not cause my professional and philosophical rupture, it magnified it. As long-standing traditions of band trips, fundraisers, and public performances crumbled without any certainty about when or how they would return, I was also living inside the ambiguity of not yet knowing what popular music performance “was” or “wasn’t,” and as my colleague—who was also field-testing this course at another high school—and I said many times, we felt as though we were building the plane as we were flying it. That state of in-between, feeling simultaneously terrified and liberated, became a catalyst for rethinking my teacher identity. Reading Joy’s piece reminded me that this overlap with COVID may not have been a coincidence: the wider collapse of certainty made room for my own process of becoming, echoing the archive’s broader insistence that fear, humility, and joy are conditions of change.

Shift Toward Social Justice

Alongside these personal reckonings, the conversation in the pages of *CME* widens into issues of social justice and systemic critique. Coinciding with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s (2015) final report (~~2015~~), contributors further expose the Eurocentrism at the heart of curriculum and insist that decolonization cannot be reduced to token lessons or “world music” projects; it demands a reimagining of whose knowledge is valued, who leads, and how learning itself is structured. In *CME*, calls to decolonize curriculum and practice point towards decentering Western art music; privileging Indigenous knowledge systems, stories, and orality; and respecting cultural protocols (Gauley, 2019; Leadbeater, 2017; Oberhofer, 2020; Prest & Tremblay, 2021; Stark, 2022). Articles about local collaborations, such as the Secwepemc Music Project in British Columbia, model possibilities for working directly with

Indigenous artists to create projects rooted in the music of the land itself, amplifying voices and practices that have been silenced for too long (Gauley, 2019).

Issues of race and representation become impossible to ignore. Darren Hamilton (2021a) draws on critical race theory and his lived experience as a Black student and educator to expose systemic inequities in Canadian music education. He highlights the erasure of Black music and histories from curriculum, the scarcity of Black educators, and the socio-economic barriers facing racialized communities. Hamilton recalls that while his own background in classical piano allowed him to meet rigid entrance requirements for post-secondary study, many of his Black peers from gospel traditions were denied the same opportunities. This exclusion reveals a deeper systemic issue: when post-secondary programs continue to privilege Eurocentric preparation in their entrance requirements, they limit who can be recognized as “qualified” and ultimately restrict the diversity of future music educators. Hamilton’s call is pointed: if schools are to serve Black students authentically, they must offer courses explicitly named and taught through Black musical practices—Gospel Choir, Jazz, R&B, Hip-Hop—rather than token integrations filtered through Eurocentric methods.

While Hamilton exposes anti-racist systems, four immigrant Canadian choral educators—Jakub Martinec (Czech Republic), Zimfira Poloz (Kazakhstan), Yohei Sakai (Japan), and Tracy Wong (Malaysia) (2021)—bring a different perspective, coming together to trouble multiculturalism through sharing their unique lived experiences. Their reflections complicate the myth of Canadian multiculturalism, describing how it often reduces culture to a diluted, generic “diversity” that erases the depth and nuance of particular traditions. Instead, they offer a vision of music education grounded in respect, encouraging consultation and collaboration with culture bearers, and recognizing that no single approach to inclusion can fit all communities. The

honesty and openness of these perspectives disrupt the archive's more cautious treatments of diversity.

By the early 2020s, the archive features localized classroom and community-based initiatives built on issues of equity and access. Before any broader systemic change in curriculum or programming, these heart-filled initiatives demonstrate what music education can look like when joy, cultural relevance, and access are treated as starting points.

Based in Toronto, Regent Park's DJ and turntable classes, for example, position joy, relevance, and practitioner partnership as essential components. Additionally, these classes demonstrate how students who had never felt at home in band rooms or similar large-ensemble programs can thrive in spaces designed around their musical lives and interests (Snell & Marsella, 2020). Similarly, a localized drumming project in an Ontario high school draws on Kpanlogo music originating from Ghana, West Africa, to support refugee students in sharing their cultural knowledge and participating meaningfully alongside their Canadian peers (Naunton & Yerichuk, 2018). These unique and powerful examples only appear fleetingly in the archive, but each points to a more expansive vision of music education that authentically embraces students' lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and creative identities.

El Sistema and Equity

Approaching equity from another perspective, El Sistema–inspired programs arrive in Canada as local adaptations of the Venezuelan orchestral model (Govias, 2014; Lorenzino, 2015). This globally recognized initiative positions ensemble-based classical training as a social justice tool by providing free access to children and asserting that collective music-making can drive social transformation. When transplanted into Canadian communities, these orchestral models offer inspiration and opportunity but also expose tensions: Can initiatives rooted in

reproducing Western traditions truly realize social change? Will the success of these programs that operate outside of the school day draw students away from school music programs? Will stakeholders see this as an opportunity to reduce funding for school music programs, pointing to the El Sistema opportunities as a sufficient alternative?

Within *CME*, evaluations of Canadian programs highlight musical and social gains alongside gaps and cultural mismatches. The CMEA responds to frenzied reactions from school music educators with a formal position paper that endorses El Sistema under the following carefully outlined conditions: government support must not be diverted, programs should remain categorized as community initiatives, and such initiatives must not displace school ensembles (“CMEA El Sistema Position Paper,” 2012). This careful framing speaks not only to enthusiasm for the program’s social potential but also to unease: a sense that if equity is pursued primarily outside the school day, the authority of school-based music could be destabilized. Read alongside the bottom-up energy of community programs like the DJ/turntable initiatives at Regent Park, the contrast is striking; one model adapts existing hierarchies in attempts to reach underserved students, while the other dismantles them to build something new.

The Break

By fall 2021, the pressure within *CME* for educators to recognize and embrace students’ diverse lived experiences and embed culturally relevant, authentic musical practices into secondary-school music programs is impossible to ignore. *CME*’s Fall 2021 issue brings this all to the center. The break drops. Guest editor Kathy Robinson (2021) opens her editorial by describing a simple scene: a Japanese student lighting up at hearing “her song” in class. In that moment, the stakes crystallize; when music education is exclusively anchored in Eurocentric frames, it risks losing connecting with the students it is meant to serve.

Robinson's Guest Editorship and Discursive Rupture

Robinson situates this *CME* issue explicitly in the wake of George Floyd's murder, the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, and Darren Hamilton's urgent calls to confront anti-Black racism in Canadian schools. Her words echo earlier refrains of social justice in the archive, but now they converge into a call that is increasingly difficult to ignore: redesign or expand music programs to center diversity and belonging, or watch students walk away. The voices collected within this issue weave together to offer a rich, layered conversation. One thread of the conversation insists that systemic anti-Black racism can only be addressed through courses explicitly named and taught through Black musical practices; another calls for racial justice to be embedded directly into ensemble work; another exposes the exclusions of Canadian faculties of music through the testimony of Black undergraduates. All of this is anchored by Karen Burke's reframing of gospel music, expanding it from "repertoire choice" to a practice of musicianship, wellness, and decolonization. Embracing a gospel mindset, the harmony of these voices manifests into testimony, carrying a powerful message of change (Burke, 2021; Hamilton, 2021b; John, 2021; Manning et al., 2021; Nieckar, 2021).

In earlier decades, contributions embracing critical conversations of social justice mirroring the ones mentioned above would have been spread apart across several issues, as opposed to curated into one issue, and tucked in here and there as outliers. Now they are the spine. What Bartel, Willingham, Stublely, and many others only gestured toward in theory has been gathered and amplified into a singular rupture.

Decolonization and Indigenization

After Robinson's issue names this rupture, the conversation disperses and deepens, with the center of gravity shifting to decolonization and Indigenization. Across a sequence of essays,

J. Alex Young, a Cree-Métis composer and PhD candidate at the time, eloquently reframes what music education means when story, spirit, and community are treated as inseparable from sound. He writes about misrepresentation and the need to relinquish institutional control to Indigenous Peoples; about language as worldview, where translation can strip songs of the truths they carry; about Two-Eyed Seeing as a way for mixed-heritage students to belong through artistic practice; and about knowledge as respect and responsibility rather than possession, among other profoundly insightful themes. Near the end of my archival listening, I will admit I was losing momentum, dulled by the repetition of topics I had already traced throughout this project. However, within the opening lines of Young's first contribution, I felt an unexpected peace, the kind that arrives when a teaching gathers loose threads and braids them into coherence. Young's writing is nourishing, and I hope that those who come to my work unfamiliar with his will choose to immerse themselves in it as I have (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2024a, 2024b).

Other post-rupture counter-lines thicken as well. Discourse on popular music pedagogy remains normalized through regular contributions from Steve Giddings, alongside new voices (Giddings, 2022, 2023; Touchette, 2025; Vitale, 2024). At the same time, a new valuable and equity-related perspective discussing restorative and relational approaches to classroom practice emerges, thanks to Erin Parkes and Jeffrey Sabo (2023), who draw on restorative frameworks outside the usual boundaries of music education discourse to frame teaching itself as a practice of healing, accountability, and relationship. Editorial leadership under adam patrick bell (2024) further reflects this effort to highlight a widening range of perspectives, which includes maintaining space for ongoing practitioner reflection. Together, these contributions extend *CME*'s focus on inclusive, diverse, expanding practice in ways that remain both grounded and evolving.

Alongside these developments, gender and 2SLGBTQ+ perspectives gain long-overdue presence, particularly through Ren Challacombe's (2023, 2025) critical examinations of identity and belonging within Canadian wind-band practices. Challacombe calls for a pedagogical shift grounded in personal reflection, risk-taking, and vulnerability, supported by an extensive literature review identifying persistent gender-based barriers that negatively shape students' experiences. Although this work remains situated largely within traditional large-ensemble contexts, it reinforces a broader turn within the archive toward centering identity, belonging, and the conditions that best support musical participation for all students.

Nearing the end of my listening, I found it serendipitous to come across the work of Roger Mantie, Traci Fly Luzon, Johnny Touchette, and Diane Murray-Charrett (2025) who, as part of a larger project funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), conducted their own deep dive into 22 years of *CME*. Writing from diverse positionalities, they probe multiculturalism, authenticity, and Canadian identity. What resonates with me is both the overlap and the difference with my combined genealogical and contrapuntal approach. Like my project, theirs recognizes the dominance of Eurocentric pedagogy, the urgency for cultural responsiveness, and the role of fear in stalling change. By contrast, their focus on multiculturalism and authenticity zooms in to examine more specific themes from diverse lived experiences, whereas my work threads these issues into a wider conversation about agency, equity, and legitimacy that is primarily guided by my interest in following multiple lines of change. Encountering their article so late in my own archival reading feels fitting; it demonstrates how multiple researchers can walk the same ground and yet be drawn to different details and interpretations. Far from duplication, it affirms that expansive projects like this will always generate distinct insights. Tangentially related, I also found myself lingering on Roger

Mantie's (2022) musings of the possibility to "build back better" in post-pandemic music education. The provocation of "music education as leisure education" (p. 28), which explores the position that teaching music socially, rather than individually, invites those who may be less likely to study music on their own into the shared experience and resulting joy of collective music-making, is captivating. Mantie complicates the argument that access to resources like YouTube, which promote self-learning (autodidacticism), dilutes the need for organized spaces like school music programs. Drawing on ancient Greek concepts of *leisure* as social rather than individual practice, his work explores research showing that people are happier when they do things together, and leaves me with appreciation, confirmation, and another way to explore joy and agency within my classroom.

The Coda: Echoes and Openings

Which leaves me where I began: part listener, part producer. When I first encountered *Canadian Music Educator* in real time, from high school band student to band director turned popular music educator, I engaged with it primarily as a resource for gaining fresh insight into a topic that I was focused on at that time—for example, articles offering advice for working with double-reed players to add to my woodwind techniques course manual, or different approaches to score study that might elevate my next wind-band rehearsal. This time, revisiting the archive with more distance and purpose as a practitioner-researcher, I heard counter-lines and textures I had missed. Patterns and tensions that had once felt more situated in the background came into focus, revealing a body of work rich with ideas, critique, and experimentation, but often short on examples of how these ideas are, or can be, sustained over time.

What began as rupture has become routine. Across 25 years, diverse musical styles, student composition and improvisation, recording, collaboration, and more explicit attention to

agency and equity have gradually moved closer to the center of professional discourse. What remains harder to find, however, are sustained accounts of secondary-school music programs where these practices build the foundation of everyday learning. Moving the needle may be less about generating new ideas and more about documenting and learning from sustained practice, centering student voices alongside teacher reflection, and ultimately reimagining teacher education to prioritize practices built on creativity, equity, and agency.

I set out to listen. What I found is both continuity and possibility: a profession naming its tensions without fully resolving them, alongside a growing body gesturing toward what might come next. The archive ends, for now, without a final chord. That feels right. Some conversations resolve; others remain open, inviting further dialogue. The next phase of secondary music education belongs to students, teachers, community partners, and programs willing to explore, adjust, sustain, and most importantly share what can be learned from the kinds of practices *Canadian Music Educator* has been foregrounding over the last 25 years.

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