



# GRADUATE MUSIC EDUCATION

**Kenneth H. Phillips**

Professor of Music, Gordon College  
Professor Emeritus, The University of Iowa

[ken.phillips@gordon.edu](mailto:ken.phillips@gordon.edu)

This essay on graduate music education is in response to an article by David Hebert on challenges and solutions in online music teacher education that appeared in the online journal, *Research and Issues in Music Education*, 5(1). I found the article stimulating because so little has been written on the topic of music teacher education at the graduate level.

It appears that graduate music education in institutions of higher learning is locked into traditions that online programs are ready to challenge. In this essay I consider this challenge from a traditionalist viewpoint to determine if an online approach is a feasible option to music education at the doctorate and master's levels. Specifically, I seek to determine what the nature of graduate degrees in music education are or should be, if online and traditional curricula are in agreement in fulfilling these requirements, and if some variant or compromise is appropriate in developing music teachers at the graduate level.

## **Doctoral Music Education**

The principal objective of the doctoral curriculum in music education (specifically the Ph.D., but also, in some cases, the D.M.A. and Ed.D.) is to develop scholars who do research. Most universities and colleges expect their faculty to participate in the discovery of new knowledge and to publish their findings in refereed journals. Scholarly productivity has become synonymous with the awarding of tenure. While teaching and service are additional components included in tenure decisions at most schools, it is common knowledge that without a publication record most professors find it almost impossible to be promoted to tenured ranks. Therefore, doctoral students take courses that emphasize the research process, and are expected to produce a dissertation that reflects a major research investigation.

## **Impart Knowledge**

The coursework in the doctoral curriculum typically focuses on four main areas: music theory, music history (western and nonwestern), music education, and research. The delivery for courses in these areas is very much a book-lecture format. Professors present lectures based upon assigned readings, and assessment is made via written tests. In addition, papers and/or projects are regularly required. This traditional approach seems to adapt well to online delivery where knowledge is the key element. Students electing online courses have the advantage of moving through content at their own pace and at a schedule that does not require set class attendance. The educational goal to "impart knowledge" in a flexible format is one of the strengths of online programs.

A dissertation is the culminating research project in the doctoral curriculum. Each student chooses a topic and works closely on a major research investigation with a faculty member. I have worked with students via the Internet in the dissertation process, and while I prefer the one-on-one rapport established when working in person with a student, there is no reason that a student cannot fulfill the dissertation requirement while working with the director online. Preliminary discussion when formulating the dissertation topic could be more difficult than a face-to-face meeting, but such work also can be accomplished via the telephone. A dissertation is basically a knowledge component requiring the student to work more independently as he or she develops the capacity to do research. The online process is amenable to this process.

### **Grow in Musical Skills**

It is my experience that most doctoral students in residence desire to continue their development as musicians. Many will continue to study in their applied areas, and some, hoping to find college jobs that include an ensemble component, continue their study of conducting. An ensemble requirement is common among schools of music, and doctoral students can be found in the ranks of choruses, bands, orchestras, and operas. These students are musicians who want to further develop their musical skills.

How do students enrolled in online doctoral programs grow in performance skills? I don't know for I have not seen evidence that such offerings as applied lessons, conducting, and ensembles are offered in an online format. It is possible, perhaps, that students could elect to study privately and to take part in ensembles at nearby colleges and universities that offer graduate credit that is transferable. However, it is unlikely that students who elect an online doctoral program because of scheduling convenience will have or take the time to do so. This could be interpreted as an inherent weakness in online degree programs. While knowledge is easily imparted, skills are not. Perhaps those students who do not have an interest in developing further as musicians are better suited to online study.

The question that arises from this discussion is this—should growth in musical skills be seen as a necessary component of the doctoral curriculum? With a focus on research, perhaps the doctoral program does not need a skills-based component. Except for the ensemble requirement for full-time students, applied music and conducting are typically presented as elective options for music education students at most universities. My experience has been that these options are important to many students. Do doctoral students who elect to study online feel cheated that these options are not available to them, and do they give any thought to this deficiency before electing online study? These are questions worth asking of institutions who offer online doctoral music education programs.

### **Develop Teaching Skills**

The traditional doctoral curriculum has little to do with the further development or refinement of teaching skills. Courses in methods of teaching are generally lacking, and those that do exist are typically offered as electives. In my doctoral program I elected a course in Dalcroze Eurhythmics in which the class spent most of its time on its feet moving about the room to music. I cannot conceive of how this course might be offered online. Nevertheless, online curricula seem to have little need for courses on the development of teaching skills because this content is not a required part of the traditional doctoral music education program.

Where doctoral students do gain in the development of teaching skills occurs almost indirectly when they hold teaching assistantships and teach undergraduate music education courses. The teaching assistants I have had were eager to gain experience in the classroom, and most taught at least one course on their own each semester. This proved to be invaluable experience for them as they prepared to take their places as instructors in college and university classrooms.

Recently, I was part of a search committee looking for an assistant professor in music education. One candidate seemed to be perfect “on paper” for the job. However, responses to questions regarding the content of undergraduate methods courses were surprisingly weak. Later it was determined that this candidate had no experience as a teaching assistant. The committee concluded that this lack of experience must have been related to the candidate’s lack of knowledge regarding undergraduate course content. Clearly, this candidate was at a disadvantage for not having teaching assistant experience.

Do online doctoral curricula offer doctoral students experience as teaching assistants? I suspect they do not. This could be the greatest weakness that online institutions have in developing doctoral degree programs. If they cannot provide teaching experience for students who hope to become college and university professors, do they create a disadvantage for these students? I imagine that prospective doctoral students when considering a doctoral program might not even consider the importance that serving as a teaching assistant might have for future employment. It could be, in the end, the most important thing they do during their residency. An online program that does not offer this opportunity must be seen as having a critical weakness for those preparing to become professors.

### **Knowledge and Skills**

The online process for doctoral work seems suited to imparting and evaluating knowledge. What is questionable is whether or not techniques can be developed to improve musical and teaching skills. A greater problem arises when considering that most applied music lessons are delivered as one-on-one instruction. This is expensive teaching. However, a doctoral program devoid of skills-based coursework is possible. Is it preferable to the traditional approach? In my opinion, music education students should seek to become better practicing musicians, especially for those who seek jobs in colleges where job descriptions often include applied teaching and ensemble directing. Also, the lack of experience in teaching undergraduate courses as a teaching assistant seems to be a major weakness of online doctoral programs. I do not know how this problem can be resolved unless the online program has a residency requirement. That, however, seems to work against the very nature of online education. Clearly, the online approach seems best suited to knowledge-based learning.

### **The Master's Degree in Music Education**

Most students who enroll in graduate degree programs at the master's level in music education are school music teachers. The vast majority of these people will not move on to doctoral study upon completion of master's work. Therefore, the master's curricula is not focused on developing scholars—the focus is on developing better music teachers who most likely will conclude their careers in teaching music at the K-12 level.

### **Impart Knowledge**

Like the doctoral curriculum, the master's curriculum in music education has a strong focus on the acquisition of new knowledge. Courses in western and nonwestern music as well as coursework in music theory are required. Diagnostic tests are given by most colleges and universities to assess undergraduate preparation in these areas, and remedial work is required for those who do not pass the entrance exams.

A substantial portion of the knowledge component of curricula in music education master's degrees is related to the specific field of music teaching. Courses vary but typically cover such areas as history and philosophy of music education, learning theory (psychology of music), assessment, curriculum development, and at least one course in music education research.

As with doctoral coursework that emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge, courses at the master's level in music education are suited to both traditional and online approaches. When "imparting knowledge" is the focus, students enrolled in either venue can read textbooks, engage in discussion, follow lectures, take tests, write papers, and so forth. Those in the online program have the advantage of studying at their own pace and convenience.

### **Grow in Musical Skills**

School music teachers typically begin their graduate study with a foundation of an undergraduate music degree (BM, BA, BS). They studied an applied music area (vocal or instrumental) and most gave a senior recital. They also sang in choirs, and/or played in bands and orchestras. These music majors graduated as musicians who chose to teach music in the schools.

Why do students choose to become music teachers? Mostly it is because of their love of music. Music teachers are musicians, and I have found that the majority of them want to become better musicians as part of their graduate-level study. By becoming better musicians they will be able to help their students grow as musicians.

The traditional approach to master's study in music education allows for students to take skills-related courses in such venues as conducting, applied music, and ensembles. Such courses are highly recommended by the National Association of Schools of Music as part of overall degree requirements for the master's degree in music education. However, these course offerings are problematic for online programs where skills-related development has yet to be addressed by those offering online programs. If a master's degree in music education were totally knowledge-based it would seem that becoming a better musician is not related to becoming a better music teacher. Who would make that claim?

### **Develop Teaching Skills**

Many schools that have master's curricula in music education offer elective courses in teaching methods, e.g., advanced choral, instrumental and general music methods. In these courses students are required to teach and demonstrate competencies in teaching and/or conducting. Some schools offer opportunities for students to participate in Lab settings where choral and/or instrumental experience is gained and students do the conducting. Specialized courses in general music methods are common, e.g., levels of Kodály and Orff instruction. General music courses also exist where students observe each other teaching.

A growing practice among schools offering the master's degree is to permit students to elect either a thesis or practicum option. In the latter a student designs an action research project and carries it out in his or her own classroom under the guidance of a mentor. A faculty member from the degree-granting institution observes each student in a field setting, giving validation to the level of proficiency expected from the teaching candidate. This can be viewed as a type of student teaching, but at a far more advanced level.

A colleague from a prestigious school of music once told me he had received a call from an elementary principal where one of their university graduates was teaching music. The principal complained that he had rarely observed such poor quality teaching, and wanted to know how the music education program could turn out such a product. My colleague admitted that he had never seen the teacher in question teach, which he saw as a major flaw in the design of the program's curriculum. What the school did was to adopt a policy guaranteeing any school with such a problem that a faculty member would go out and work with the problem teacher in his or her classroom, no matter the distance from the university! Such a time-consuming resolution could easily have been resolved had the candidate's teaching been evaluated as part of degree requirements. A capstone project involving teaching in a field-based experience works well to this end.

## Knowledge and Skills

There is no doubt that much of what is to be learned in the master's program in music education can be learned from lectures and books. Both traditional and online approaches are suited to this type of learning. However, assessment of teaching skill is another matter.

Assessing the skill of music teaching is as important at the graduate level as it is at the undergraduate. I cannot imagine a school awarding a master's degree in conducting to a student who has not conducted a recital. However, the awarding of advanced degrees to teachers who are never observed teaching is a common practice among traditional and online master's degree granting institutions. The general public believes that a teacher who receives a master's degree in teaching is a better teacher in the classroom. This is probably not the case for many teachers.

## Summary

Online educational programs, like their traditional counterparts, have demonstrated the capacity to impart and assess knowledge-based subject matter. Music has a time-honored knowledge base. Teaching, however, is a skill. It requires the ability to dispense knowledge in a sequenced, purposeful, and meaningful way. Graduate programs that do not focus on teaching skill as a requisite for the degree, especially at the master's level, are doing a disservice to those teachers who are awarded their degrees.

The question is one of relevancy—is the graduate program relevant to the world of music instruction? Do students who are awarded graduate degrees show improvement as teachers, and do the subjects studied relate to the real world of the classroom? Knowledge alone will not do. To be truly successful, ways must be found to make both traditional and online instruction sensitive to the issue of musical and teaching-skills development.

Online programs could require that a student show proof of participation in some type of ensemble in their community or nearby college or university. Accepting applied music credit also could become an elective option. A weekend symposia required of all students might address various musicianship topics. At a minimum students enrolled in online programs should be required to demonstrate musical competence in conducting, something that most music teachers do on a regular basis.

Traditional programs might benefit from offering at least a part of their knowledge-based courses online, thus permitting students to study and advance without attending all classes on campus. The convenience of online instruction is without doubt. However, unless musical and teaching skills are part of the curricula, online and traditional instruction become little more than diploma-mill opportunities, and education continues to suffer. Graduate-granting degree institutions should be able to validate that teachers receiving graduate degrees, especially at the master's level, are good teachers with in-depth knowledge of their subject matter. Knowledge and skills go hand-in-hand for developing a relevant and meaningful graduate-degree program in music education.

## About the Author

With a B.M. from Westminster College, M.M. from West Virginia University, and a Ph.D. from Kent State University, Kenneth Phillips is Professor of Music and Director of Graduate Studies in Music Education at Gordon College. He is also Professor emeritus at The University of Iowa. An award-winning researcher and teacher, Dr. Phillips has authored four books (*Teaching Kids to Sing*, Schirmer Books; *Basic Techniques of Conducting*, Oxford University Press; *Directing the Choral Music Program*, Oxford; *Exploring Research in Music Education & Music Therapy*, Oxford), has written numerous articles on child and adolescent vocal research and has presented workshops throughout the United States, Canada and Australia.

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