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by Ana M. Vernia

EMILY AKUNO

Ana M. Vernia **Why music in your life?**

Emily Akuno

Music is a gift. According to my late mother, her mother (my maternal grandmother) was renowned singer. And so the love for and talent in music run in our larger family.

At a personal level, music grounds me. It settles me during turbulent moments, and gives me a pleasant way of engaging with the realities of life.

You have held important positions of responsibility. How do you perceive music education worldwide?

Global trends in music education, especially during this Covid-19 season, spell the triumph of human creativity. The human spirit of resilience, ability to bounce back, and attitude of hope have shown through as teachers adapted remote teaching strategies to keep learners musically equipped, and musicians adapted strategies to keep music in the air. The online spaces that had hitherto been patronized by a select few have become the lifeline for most of us.

There's diversity in definition and appreciation of what is referred to as music education. There are, equally, diverse spaces for the teaching (or more importantly, learning) of music. What one might call informal is quite formal when broken down into the pertinent content, time-frame (however elastic) and procedures. The musical expressions themselves are different from one community to another.

But a running definition prevails, for me – that music education is the sum total of activities that individuals undertake that lead to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills (including skills to apply that knowledge) that enable them to gain meaning in the presence of a music stimulus, and thus participate meaningfully in music-based activities in their community.

This, to me, sums up music education globally, because with music's communal attributes, people's ability to engage in it contributes to the making of communities. Music education is therefore a robust field.

Music is part of the culture of a country and is very important for human development. Why do you think music is not fully integrated into formal education?

I wonder if there's a true understanding of the role that music plays in human existence? Because if planners knew, they would avail it to all learners.

For much of Africa, the procedures of oral traditions clearly distinguish between, thereby articulating the need for, a general music education that I call (arts) literacy, and the training of professionals. This, to me, is a basic right because music is a means of engaging with things to do with life and living, and hence the value of the general music education. Nonetheless, society has formal activities that require good quality music, and hence the need to train musicians at a professional level. The communities that benefit from an educational engagement would help define and determine the scope of music education, so that local relevance is maintained.

I think the other challenge with music is, as a cultural emblem, the decision as to which music to include in education faces education planners, especially those in multi-lingual, hence multi-cultural, classes and schools. Finally, the integration of music into 'formal' education requires that somebody owns the decision to move in that direction. Without champions for music education, it might remain a 'filler-subject'.

A lot of research in music education is currently underway. The ISME presents many investigations in different fields and context. Do you consider that the research being carried out has a considerable impact on society?

Yes, I do. I know that ISME research outcomes have an impact on society. I wish to single out some of the projects that ISME members conduct in the community. I remember my own ISME-sponsored project that empowered young learners in rural Kenya to build confidence, among other observed character traits.

ISME members' research findings inform practice, with some of it leading directly to curri-

culum changes. The different contexts of our members' research require different types of knowledge. Whenever I see reports of comparative research, or multi-site investigations, I am persuaded that the much hoped for networking and collaboration are taking place.

Finally, ISME members are thought-leaders in their respective countries and work stations. These influential positions open doors for the research output that is readily available to members through the IJME and RIEM to be embedded in development plans and activities.

In these times of pandemic, what would you say has been your perception of the benefits of music?

I come from a community where there's music for and in all occasions and activities. I have noticed that, sometimes, the catastrophes yield more music than the celebrations. The place of music in creating a sense of normalcy or stability, and providing means of coping, has been confirmed, if not entrenched in our thinking these past several months. The world sings to rally support for suffering populations. The world has 'sung', in various virtual choirs and orchestras/bands in solidarity with those who are ill or bereaved. Music is a social emblem, and a socializing activity. People look to each other when things are tough. Music's role in enabling this coming together when physical gatherings could not happen is but one of the many values of music that we have experienced.

We know that in the SDGs, the most important thing is to eradicate hunger and poverty, but we also know that education plays a relevant role. Do you think governments are aware of the potential of music education to improve the SDGs?

For as long as music practice is associated with pleasure and entertainment only, and its life-enhancing attributes downplayed, music education will escape the focus necessary for it to be on the spotlight towards attainment of the SDGs. Music education, music in education, education through music ... and any other applications of music, are crucial for the training of human beings in a holistic manner.

Besides, the creative economy that thrives on music and is an employer of thousands for whom music is the means of alleviating poverty and getting access to decent food, shelter etc.

I am persuaded that governments are aware of the potential of music education to attain the SDGs, but they probably focus on activities that are deemed to have direct impact on the areas targeted by the SDGs.

If you had powers, what three things would you improve in this world?

Attitudes of humans – to show respect for 'the other';

The curriculum – especially at lower levels of education – so that learners spend much time in discovery through play;

The socio-economic situation in Africa.

Finally, what advice would you give future music teachers?

I see a tendency for parents to approach a good performer AFTER a show to apply for music lessons for their children, in support of my notion that the best musician should be the music teacher.

I suggest that future music teachers learn to make music with and for self, and then with and for others. That mastery of the vocabulary and technical elements in music will enable them become 'good', successful and effective teachers.

