

January 1998

Granton: A Parable of Change

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GRANTON

A PARABLE OF CHANGE

This story describes influences and pressures causing dramatic changes in music studies at Granton, an imaginary university.

BY QUENTIN FAULKNER

The mass media abound with tales of fundamental change in the world of classical music. A *New York Times* article on the crisis in the classical compact disc (CD) industry reports that, after a transient rise in sales during the 1980s, classical CDs' market share dropped to an all-time low of 2.9 percent.¹ There are also frequent reports of funding woes that have reduced and, in some instances, put an end to entire orchestras. A string of articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and other newspapers has chronicled the seismic shift from classical to mass-media-oriented music in churches, where a sizeable percentage of today's classical musicians formed their musical tastes and were offered their first opportunities to perform.² Enthusiasm for public school swing choirs in some places has eclipsed the preeminent stature of traditional choral ensembles. In a January 1997 National Public Radio interview on *All Things Considered*, Edward Rothstein, cultural critic at large for the *New York Times*, discussed an article in which he had suggested that much classical music did not speak to the



File photo

Band music, along with classical music and jazz, is found in the curriculum of most schools of music in the United States.

mythic images of today's listeners and would therefore play a much reduced role in U.S. culture in the future.³

The Present Scenario

Conditions such as fewer professional orchestras and a decline of public interest in classical music will undoubtedly influence the study of music in colleges and universities. Those institutions typically center their curricula on the study, both historical and applied, of (1) classical music, from collegia musica to nine-

teenth-century standard orchestral literature to classical choral music to developments in twentieth-century art music; (2) the performance of jazz, a species that commands a very limited share of the music marketplace; and (3) band music, a genre that is cultivated in only a few specific settings, primarily in schools or as an adjunct to athletic events, and bears little resemblance to current popular music. To state the matter bluntly, a very small percentage of the U.S. population wants to listen to the types of

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music that are cultivated in the average U.S. college and university department of music, and most of the population wants to listen to music that is poorly, if at all, represented in the typical music department.

It has been evident for some time that fundamental change is in the offing for the study of music in U.S. higher education. But what form will that change take? How should music departments prepare themselves for it? The following parable is intended to focus attention on the issues at stake and to help launch discussion on prudent and appropriate responses to inevitable change. It assumes the standpoint of a historian writing toward the middle of the twenty-first century, reviewing changes that have come about in the study of music at the University of Granton, an imaginary school. The parable is of course entirely fictional, but it is also entirely plausible, given the prevailing circumstances in the U.S. musical scene at the end of the twentieth century.

The Parable of Granton

Granton, situated in the midwestern United States, became a state in the mid-nineteenth century. Almost immediately after achieving statehood, Granton founded in the city of Tyler a university, a land grant institution that by the late twentieth century had more than 25,000 students and almost 1,500 faculty. Early in the twentieth century, the university had formed a school of music, a division that, at its height in the late twentieth century, boasted more than 400 music majors and forty faculty members. The story of the school of music is illustrative of the profound changes that have completely altered the character of arts education in the United States during the first half of the twenty-first century.

■ **2002.** The first definitive sign of change occurred in 2002. Under pressure from fundamental changes in the surrounding culture, the school condensed its heretofore obligatory study of early European music history for music majors into a single semester for all music up to 1800. The study of American jazz, world music, and popular music was greatly augmented, as

was the study and practice of music improvisation. The school did not act unilaterally; it followed a general trend in U.S. higher education in music. Graduate entrance requirements and graduate comprehensive examinations were appropriately altered to reflect the new emphasis.

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■ **2007.** The next sign of change occurred in the year 2007 with the simultaneous retirement of the school's professor of organ. The study of organ had been a part of the school's curriculum since its founding. By 2000, however, a majority of churches had dispensed with organs in worship, and the number of organ students had declined noticeably. Furthermore, the school's organs were in poor condition, and there were no funds for major repairs or new instruments. The school decided not to replace the retiring faculty member, but rather to contract with an organist in a prominent local church to provide organ instruction of a more limited scope.

■ **2014.** In 2014, the Tyler Symphony Orchestra Association, beset by declining audiences and financial woes, was forced into bankruptcy. The organization had for some time been philosophically adrift, due to its increasing adoption of popular music events (in an attempt to augment its audience) and corresponding neglect of the more substantial symphonic repertoire. The symphony orchestras of several other cities in the state were experiencing problems similar to Tyler's.

The solution to these problems was the formation of a state orchestra, an organization underwritten by a broad coalition of private sponsors, industry and business, foundations, and state and local governments. It undertook several series of concerts at various locations across the state, featuring a variety of musical styles, including all genres of popular music. Its membership roster was made up of almost all the musicians in the former city orchestras. Music faculty and students at the university were therefore able to continue to perform in a professional symphony orchestra, but experienced a reduction in income and (more important) in the number of concerts they played.

■ **2015.** The departure of a piano faculty member in 2015 occasioned a reassessment of the school's keyboard curriculum. The piano faculty had been successful in maintaining enrollment in its area, but a number of students began to request training in music technology. A re-accreditation team had strongly suggested that a faculty member proficient in music technology and with a keyboard background, a resource already available in a majority of other music departments across the nation, be added to the school's curriculum. The school decided to retain the study of classical piano, taught by the remaining member of the piano faculty, but to add a faculty member in music technology.

■ **2017.** A series of initiatives to alleviate the tax burden on the state's citizens, begun in the final decades of the twentieth century, scored a sweeping victory in 2017. A tax formula, agreed upon by a broad coalition of local governments and the state government, strengthened the public school core curriculum, but eliminated as nonessential the study of music and art in elementary and middle schools and made them extracurricular in high schools. The formula eliminated tax support (including all support services) for public school sports programs as well. A groundswell of public financial support quickly assumed sponsorship for both sports and instrumental (though not choral) music programs. Without the stabilizing influence of tax support, however,

Music Educators Journal, Vol. 84, No. 4, (Jan., 1998), pp. 17-20
instrumental music programs eventually began to destabilize.

The effects of these developments on the university school of music were far-reaching, including a decrease in the number of music majors and their level of preparedness. Elementary and secondary school employment opportunities for music graduates also declined dramatically. The school of music intensified its efforts to counsel and train students for careers in other branches of music, and it was partially successful in counteracting the decline in its student body.

■ **2022.** In 2022, a significant bequest to the University Foundation enabled the school of music to institute a long-envisioned preparatory department. A number of faculty members became involved with this new department, both as administrators and as teachers of advanced high school students. After the preparatory students graduated from high school, however, the school of music lost a number of these students to other colleges and universities. Advanced high school instrumentalists began to be incorporated into school of music ensembles and began to earn college credit for applied music lessons, a development that aroused increasing concern among university administrators and faculty in other disciplines, due to the inevitable blurring of the distinction between secondary and post-secondary education in the school of music.

■ **2027.** By 2027, popular demand for the study of music technology was sufficient to warrant the addition of another faculty member. That expansion made even more obvious the dearth of faculty expertise in the area of music industry. Two years later, therefore, the school was successful in securing funds to hire a faculty member to serve that need. Growth in the area was immediate, indeed phenomenal, and four years later yet another faculty member was brought in to meet student demand.

■ **2029.** The school of music seized the opportunity offered it in 2029 to cooperate in the founding of a new department at the university, American Cultural Studies. One of the faculty in the new department specialized

in American popular music, and she was granted a joint appointment in the new department and in the school of music. The faculty in the burgeoning music technology and music industry areas had a natural affinity to this new enterprise, and the school began to garner national visibility as a result of the strength of its new faculty. The school established links with several companies in entertainment centers in California, Tennessee, and Missouri and began to dispatch faculty to offer on-site courses in various entertainment skills.

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■ **2032.** By this time, the voice department, which had maintained its longstanding emphasis on art song and opera, was perceived as clearly out of step with new developments at the school. In 2032, the retirement of one voice faculty member and the early retirement of another offered the opportunity to bring to the faculty two singers who specialized in the technique and performance of popular vocal musics: Broadway, rock and roll, country, ethnic, and gospel. Three years later, the school mounted a highly successful musical production (incorporating the new styles) in the university's performing arts center. The production, skillfully publicized, ran for twenty nights to full houses, and subsequent productions soon became an important source of revenue for the school's operating budget.

At some point toward the end of the twentieth century, the university athletic department installed a num-

ber of large television screens, coordinated with a sophisticated system of electronic speakers, in the football stadium. With the passing of time, these screens became increasingly larger and more prominent.

The screens were intended to allow fans to view close-ups of the action on the football field, but they soon began to play a role in the half-time shows as well. The screens showed close-up shots of the university marching band as it performed on the field, but they also began to feature brief segments similar to MTV.

■ **2038.** It had long been suspected that the music of the marching band belonged to a past era and was no longer popular with the majority of sports fans. The popular clamor for more MTV-like segments on the screens proved that such suspicions were well-founded. In 2038, the athletic department decided to eliminate the marching band from its half-time shows, replacing them with a mixture of MTV clips and high-energy choreography from a group of students on the field.

Since a significant percentage of student involvement in applied music and in ensembles derived from student participation in the marching band, the school of music experienced a drop in the number of students studying brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments during the years after 2038. This decline was exacerbated by insecure career opportunities in music education for students in those fields.

■ **2045.** In 2045, the president of the university appointed a committee that comprised university faculty, concerned citizens, and state government officials. The committee was charged with formulating recommendations for the reform of music education at the post-secondary level in the state of Granton. The committee was faced with increasingly evident public controversy about the purpose of the school of music. The school, however, reflected the general situation of music education throughout the entire state.

Even more significant for the committee's deliberations was the opinion expressed by many university faculty and administrators that the changes over the past fifty years had trans-

formed the school of music almost entirely into a trade school, a supplier of products for the popular music industry. The element of music performance had always been significant in the school of music's curriculum. In the twentieth century, however, that element had been balanced by the study of music history and by the cultivation of substantial art music that lay at the heart of its applied music instruction. That more substantial, intellectually challenging element now played a peripheral role in the school of music's curriculum.

A number of voices began to suggest that it would be more appropriate to relegate the study of all music performance and music industry/technology to a proposed new institution supported not by tax dollars, but entirely by the powerful and economically secure music entertainment industry. The committee ultimately recommended the formation of such an institution and the dismantling of the school of music. The university president and board of trustees accepted the recommendation. The school of music was closed.

Analysis of the Parable

Some music educators in music departments across the U.S. may greet this parable with dismay. As to whether it is pessimistic or realistic, however, depends entirely on one's point of view. Those who have committed their careers to the propagation of art music ("classical" music) will of course find the piece distasteful. On the other hand, those who have been frustrated in their attempts to develop skills for the music entertainment industry may well greet it with enthusiastic affirmation. In any event, both supporters and detractors will have to admit that it takes into account most of the current trends that shape the present direction of musical practice and listening in this country.

Presuming that the parable reflects potential reality, it poses a number of significant problems that will have to be addressed. The end of the parable alludes to the first of these: the place of music in institutions of higher education. New fields of inquiry are continually appearing and expanding, and

budget pressures become ever greater in higher education; these are two givens that are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. In such a climate, every educational endeavor is likely to come under intense and continual scrutiny. History teaches us that music has not always been a part of university curricula; in its present form, it is less than 150 years old. If it is determined that music education can be more adequately served by the world of business, then there is nothing to prevent music from experiencing such a shift of support.

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To whatever degree music remains in the curriculum, it will eventually have to pass the test of intellectual substance to secure its place. Music entered the curriculum in the nineteenth-century because it manifested itself as a challenging discipline per se; that is, not simply an interesting historical or sociological phenomenon, but an endeavor whose mastery required long and arduous study, stringent self-discipline, intellectual rigor, and high ideals. It was understood not fundamentally as a popular art, open to the many, but as a fine art, with inherent standards of discrimination. By its very nature, the music entertainment industry cannot sympathize with or subscribe to such a view of music. By its very nature, higher education cannot ultimately sympathize with or subscribe to any other. The relative "unpopularity" of jazz (whose following represents only a small fraction of the music market-

place) proves that the attention given to "classical" music is a smoke screen; the fundamental issue is one of musical substance—music that places demands on both performers and listeners versus music conceived for entertainment or commercial ends.

Then there is the question of those who are gifted with extraordinary musical intellect and talent. Some of them will inevitably be impelled to explore musical realms that are of no interest to the music entertainment industry. How shall they be educated? And once educated, what substantive musical role can they fulfill in the society in which they live?

If this parable accomplishes nothing else, it should make it clear that everyone presently involved with music in higher education is in the same boat. No part of the curriculum that is pursued in present-day music departments is beyond the reach of the fundamental transformation that in all likelihood awaits the higher pursuit of music in the U.S. Therefore, it does not behoove us to engage in smug securities, nor does it help at all to chastise our colleagues or ourselves for presumed inadequacies in the face of imminent challenges. No one can ultimately hinder the ebb and flow of change. What we can do—and what higher education has by and large not yet done—is to continue to talk among ourselves and to others about the realities that confront us, to continue to identify commanding arguments and articulate people to speak for us, and to redouble our efforts to develop strategies for meeting future challenges and preserving that which is most essential and worthwhile in music in higher education.

Notes

1. Allan Kozinn, "A Once Proud Industry Fends Off Extinction," *New York Times*, 8 December 1996, Arts and Entertainment, p. 33.
2. Robert Johnson, "Heavenly Gifts," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 December 1990, p. 1A; Gustav R. Niebuhr, "So It Isn't Rock of Ages, It Is Rock," *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 1991, p. 1A.
3. Edward Rothstein, "Trend-Spotting: It's All the Rage," *New York Times*, 29 December 1996, sec. 2, p.1. ■