

# Playing to Win: American Exceptionalism and Corrupt Band Culture

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As students faint from the physical exhaustion of marching band and drop to their knees in tears at the sight of audition results, it becomes apparent that artistic expression was never the goal of their musical performances. The goal was to win. This isn't a rare occurrence, as competition has been the main focus of American music education for as long as many of us can remember. How has the art of music boiled down to generating victory rather than conveying passion and expression? If the emphasis of competition continues to grow, what is to become of American musicians? This research analyzes the historical texts of Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," respectively. Analysis of these texts, in collaboration with scholarly articles, notes the foundation of competition in America and addresses current flaws in the American system of music education. America cannot change its past but it can adjust the ways in which its competitive history dictates current methods of music education.

It's not the least bit unusual to see a group of high schoolers holding shiny instruments and running around a parking lot in one-hundred-degree weather. If you look closely, the parking lot is painted with the lines of a football field and there are grown adults screaming at them to march more in time or to scoot over a couple inches to the left. Every year groups of young student musicians sit in a room and play the same etudes for judges who are hidden behind bed sheets quietly making marks each time a student plays a wrong note. This is how American public education band programs teach their students how to make music, and this is a prime example of the concept of American exceptionalism. When the United States gained its independence from Great Britain, it made a great effort have a culture quite different from that of which was held in Europe. Eventually the United States needed more than independence; it became a subliminal national objective to be different but better.

Public education band programs have always

been a jumble of toil, friendship, and excitement, but as of late have induced a high amount of stress for students. With competition after competition and the increasing need to empirically evaluate music performance in band programs, it's no wonder high school students are having a hard time naming what it is about music that makes them continue to do it. While competition can be an excellent way to engage young members in band culture, this competition poses a threat to the appreciation of music such that it requires the excessive input of energy and time from students whose main goals are often not yet prioritized to music. This paper addresses the historical shift in American band culture, the recent shift in public education legislation, the increasing competitiveness in band culture, and what band programs are like in America today in order to showcase the inconsistencies between the theory and reality of American band programs. American band programs are guided with the intention to inspire, educate, and provide artistic outlets to young people; but in reality, such programs have become pitfalls of

emotional and physical stress driven by competition and other various methods employed by the American music education system which has focused band culture on action rather than art.

## Historical Shift in Band Culture

It was once the norm for wind bands to play music, such as marches, as a form of encouragement for those who were serving in the military. But eventually, there was a shift in history where wind bands began performing a form of entertainment for the American people rather than inspiration for American soldiers. This refashioning of band culture cannot be attributed to an exact date in time, but it is better understood as a slow shift that occurred throughout an era: the era in which John Philip Sousa gained his fame. Even those who have not the slightest idea of the purpose of a wind band will likely recognize this name.

Georgetown's musicologist Patrick Warfield captured John Philip Sousa's journey to becoming America's March King in his article, "Make the Band: The Formation of John Philip Sousa's Ensemble." In 1880, John Philip Sousa began to lead the U. S. Marine Band, which, at the time, was locally popular, but "never toured [and] rarely played outside of Washington" (Warfield 31). Sousa eventually decided to stop conducting for the Marine Corps and created his own private ensemble in 1892, which featured militaristic music themes and was named Sousa's Band (Warfield 39). This new ensemble of Sousa's was formed upon contract with David Blakely, which afforded Sousa an annual salary that was "four times what he earned as a marine" (Warfield 39). Sousa's acute increase in salary and abandonment of the military suggests the growing popularity of wind bands for the American public at the time.

Sousa was only paid so highly and given a contract because he was not alone in the industry. Sousa's biggest counterpart at the time was Patrick Gilmore, with whom he was frequently compared to in terms of his conducting skills and the technical levels of his band (Warfield 44). While Sousa's band rivaled Gilmore's band for many years, Sousa's eventually surpassed the fame of Gilmore's due to the untimely death of Gilmore (Warfield 51). As Warfield points out, Sousa was a well-known and liked composer in the 1880's, yet it was in 1893 that "he had become a national celebrity" because Sousa was

able to compose music for the entire nation (Warfield 60).

We recognize the name of John Philip Sousa because Sousa took military music played by military wind bands and renovated it into a genre of music played by non-military bands and cherished by the entire nation. Sousa truly managed to materialize American wind band culture during his lifetime such that he composed 136 military marches and redeveloped the tuba into the marching version that we recognize today as the sousaphone (Britannica). Most importantly, Sousa raised the level for what a true wind band should be, such that his band had exceptional technical abilities and "[produced] a higher class of music" for its time (Warfield 43). After Sousa was done, it was a different form of art for the American people.

## Recent Shift in Public Education Legislation

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was signed in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson with the goal of enhancing the quality of school for young Americans. After a period of time, laws need reauthorization; thus, then-President George W. Bush reformed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act into the No Child Left Behind Act by in 2002. The No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law to create equality for students by focusing on how children are prepared for state assessments and addressing achievement gaps between young students (Every Student Succeeds).

After fourteen years, the act was once again in need of reauthorization, so the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized into the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 by then-President Obama (Every Student Succeeds). The Every Student Succeeds Act focuses on preparing high school students for college and protecting those who are at an economic disadvantage for academic success (Every Student Succeeds). There is a hitch to the Every Student Succeeds Act, however, being that music and arts have been given significantly more funding from the states:

*Each local education agency...that receives an allocation under section 4105(a) shall use a portion of such funds to develop and implement*

*programs and activities that support access to a well-rounded education and that...may include programs and activities, such as...programs and activities that use music and the arts as tools to support student success through the promotion of constructive student engagement, problem solving, and conflict resolution [and] Each State*

**"As students gain stronger technical abilities, the passion in their music is lowered due to their music being empirically assessed."**

*that receives an allotment under section 4103 shall use the funds available under subsection (a)(3) for activities and programs designed to meet the purposes of this subpart, which may include...supporting local educational agencies in providing programs and activities that... increasing student access to and improving student engagement and achievement in... activities and programs in music and the arts (S.1177).*

This increase in funding has prompted music and art programs in public schools to be treated similarly to qualitative classes such as sciences and mathematics, rather than the creative outlets they were originally created to be for students. This legislation supports high school band directors in their choices to assess student performance skills in qualitative fashions and therefore ignore assessments of artistic aspects. But what happens when music classes, such as band programs in public schools, are placed on the same level as core curriculum courses? Band programs risk becoming a class where mistakes become more important than success. In theory, these assessments are supposed to push students to be better at their instruments and become better musicians. Yet, in reality, the opposite occurs. As students gain stronger technical abilities, the passion in their music is lowered due to their music being empirically assessed.

## **Competition in Band Culture**

Measuring musical success by competition does more than place musicians in an order of chairs in a classroom, it affects how students perceive their overall success in life. Adria Rachel Hoffman's

"Exclusion, engagement and identity construction in a socioeconomically diverse middle school wind band classroom," in the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, uses six extensive case studies on six different middle school children enrolled in wind band who had "diverse socio-economic, ethnic, musical and academic backgrounds" in order to understand how middle school wind band can influence the identities of middle school children (Hoffman 214). Each child would tell Hoffman about their "perceptions, relationships, personal struggles, successes and goals" throughout the duration of one year of middle school band (Hoffman 214).

Hoffman initially found that the middle-school children would purposely avoid sticking out from the group, and instead choose to blend in by altering their actions to become more similar to the group as a whole (Hoffman 216-218). Hoffman found that one of the participants noted that another student would "[avoid] 'showing off' his musical skills," likely in order to avoid sticking out of the group (Hoffman 218). But interestingly enough, Hoffman found that as soon as "the band teacher introduced competition into the classroom, [Hoffman's] participants questioned their previously asserted identities as band members and expressed feelings of insecurity" (Hoffman 218). While at least one of Hoffman's participants was in support of auditions to separate the students based on talent, it didn't change the fact that the auditions would change the way each student was perceived (Hoffman 219). Overall, Hoffman found that children who participated in middle school band had a shift in identity (Hoffman 209-226).

Noa Kageyama of The Julliard School points out in "Are Competitions Good or Bad?" how competition can be both a good and bad factor in the study of music, but also that it's important to consider when and where it is being applied (Kageyama). Kageyama makes an analogy to professional sports compared to youth sports, being that "the primary goal of youth sports has always been education" while the goal of professional sports "is not education, but entertainment" (Kageyama). When applying this observation to competition for youth musicians, it becomes clear that young people participating in competitions have a different dynamic when compared to other groups of people. This is because it is young people who are much more heavily engaged

in the process of being educated as compared to adults.

A common form of competition seen in the field of music is an audition. Many high school musicians are required to create audition tapes at some point in their study of music. Auditions are both an important and decisive element of any given fine art, as there must be a way to separate those with more experience and talent from those who have not yet acquired such skills. This separation allows for there to be groups of artists who can successfully work toward common goals. While engaging young musicians in the audition process does prepare them for the professional world of music, the criterion on which they are often measured only sets them up for a conception of failure.

The American Federation of Musicians' "6 Tips on Nailing that Orchestral Audition Recording" describes six specific ways in which one should approach the creation of an audition tape for an orchestra (6 Tips). In this article, the first tip to its audience is to "aim for perfection," yet not once does it ever mention that one should aim for musicality (6 Tips). This is the kind of message that is being spread to not only those who already have developed their musicality, but it is also being spread to the young people that have yet to do so. While it is important to "never send a recording that contains errors in tuning or timing," there is also a sense of musicality that is lost when one is repeatedly playing a phrase over again for the sake of perfection (6 Tips).

## American Band Programs Today

As music programs fall more in line with core-curriculum courses, music education teachers in public schools have begun to change the ways in which they teach music. In "A history of the North American Band Directors' Coordinating Committee, 1960–1970" by John M. Seybert for the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, Seybert claims that "a cyclical process has resulted in many directors' refusal to concede valuable rehearsal time and performance opportunities in favor of a comprehensive music curriculum that is student centered, not program centered" (Seybert). Competition has overrun band programs today, all at the expense of the livelihoods of peers, family and musicians themselves.

In addition to researching this topic, another way to understand how the reality of band culture

fails to align with its theoretical benefits would be to view it from a first-hand perspective. In my personal experience, I have participated in band all throughout middle school and high school. In middle school, it was a great way to make friends and learn how to play my instrument, but by the time I got to high school, my life was utterly consumed by the band program. More than once I had to go to band competitions instead of my other classes at school. I had to have my parents drive me to school early every day, despite my parents' jobs, because marching band rehearsal started before the school buses were running and I had yet to get my driver's license. I had to wait for hours after my region band auditions for the paper with the results to show up on the glass window of a school cafeteria because if I didn't make area I knew I'd be condemned by my band director. By my senior year, I realized I wasn't enjoying the program like I used to because the competition was getting old. I began to feel like I was just another number on the marching field and instrument because that's how students get treated when competition becomes the highest priority.

High school is supposed to be a time for young musicians to learn about what music means to them, but it has turned into a learning experience

**"You have to be willing to fight for your happiness and success in a band program because the only other choice is to not do it at all—there is no in-between."**

about what competition means to them instead. Jill F. Kilanowski, PhD, RN, CPNP, conducted a study for *The American Journal of Maternal Child Nursing* called "Marching athletes: injuries and illnesses at band camp." that describes the kinds and frequencies of injuries that high school marching band students sustain (Kilanowski 338). Kilanowski report studied the correlation between health clinic visits by 178-224 marching band students and the amount of time spent in marching band over a span of two years by these students (Kilanowski 338-347).

Kilanowski notes that high school marching bands can promote high morale for these young students, but the competitions that come with marching band "have become the focus of the high school band at the expense of showcasing the

educational merits of the music program” (Kilanowski from Hosler 340). Kilanowski compares current band directors to “coaches rather than music leader and supporters of comprehensive music education” (Kilanowski from Hosler 340). Kilanowski found that, in respect to the years 2005 and 2006, 35% and then 27% of the students she studied during these two years, had “lower extremity musculoskeletal injuries,” 26% and then 43% had skin problems, and 15% and then 3% had gastrointestinal distress (Kilanowski 344).

These strangely high percentages of students suffering from injuries from marching band is a prime example of how much America is willing to sacrifice to sustain a proliferate music education system for high schoolers. While all of this practice creates young students, who wish to pursue competition after competition, the only incentive is that their suffering has to be worth something, which has nothing to do with their passion for music. A marching band can be a great way to teach students about discipline and strength but it is not fooling anyone in its inadequacy to teach students any kind of musical skills. In America’s pursuit to push music education to the furthest extent possible, even at the high school level, it has only produced young musicians with an abundance of physical pain and an absence of knowledge in music.

When it comes to music schools and conservatories, America has an ample supply. In the article “The 20 Most Prestigious Music Degree Programs in the World,” published by Online Schools Center, a remarkable twelve of the twenty schools listed are located in the United States (The 20 Most). Seven out of the ten schools listed are American music schools in the article “10 of the Best Music Schools in the World” by Hugh McIntyre for the website Careers In Music (McIntyre). Out of fifty-eight music schools listed from all around the world, a stunning twenty-eight of them were American in an article by Amy Grant called “The Best Music Schools in the World, 2016” for CEOWorld Magazine (Grant).

Whether any of these American music schools are among the best in the world, there’s no doubt that America has developed a reputation as such. It is often believed that the United States holds greater opportunity for music careers when compared to most countries. James P. Kraft, in “Artists as Workers: Musicians and Trade Unionism in America, 1880-

1917,” claims that toward the end of the nineteenth century there was an “expanding leisure market” due to sudden industrialization, which led to “unparalleled opportunities for musicians” (Kraft 512). With the sudden rise in industrialization, it became obvious that there was “a relationship between music in the workplace and worker discipline” such that music became a method of keeping workers calm and relaxed (Kraft 513). Although there was a “blurred... distinction between amateur and professional musicians,” a formal music education was significantly more valuable when compared to an amateur passion for music (Kraft 514).

## Conclusion

Middle school band students are pitted against each other in chair tests and scales competitions and therefore learn that band is only enjoyable if they are of the highest performing players. High school band students are treated like college students who have already decided to major in music performance, hence being pushed to their near limits. None of these students are being regarded as people who want to make music with their peers as a pastime while they venture through the chaos of public education. You have to be willing to fight for your happiness and success in a band program because the only other choice is to not do it at all—there is no in-between.

Current American band programs don’t necessarily make young musicians thickheaded or plainly incapable of making music, but they have an awfully high potential to break these children. Band programs go from teaching students the notes on their instruments to immediately teaching them how to make those notes better than what their peers can produce. But they are skipping the step that teaches students how to turn their notes into music, which is crucial to teach before adding the aspect of competition to music. When this flaw occurs, a false perception of music is formed, thus skewing the idea of what music is to young Americans and subjecting them to unnecessary stress. But the competition gets old. America has created so many skilled high school musicians from its public education system for nothing, given these students just stop playing because the stress of competition drove them away.

We have allowed our children, peers, selves and nation to be taught that music is about being better than others rather than about evoking emotion

in our audience through a collective passion for the creation of music. Looking back on it, when my marching band shows in high school would end, I would always wonder what place my band got. Did we make finals? Did we make first place...? Did we lose too many points because our lines were uneven in the fourteenth set? Even if it wasn't for a competition and we were just performing for a football game, I would think about how my school and our marching band would compare to the other schools with whom we often competed against. But I never wondered if the audience—the people left their homes to come see us perform a show we had worked on perfecting for hundreds of hours—actually enjoyed the show.

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