

A Different Drummer: Nonconformist Music Teaching and the Ethos of Henry David Thoreau

By Dr. Josef Hanson, Coordinator of Music Education
at the University of Massachusetts, Boston

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (430)

Throughout history, an ecosystem of innovation has nurtured music education's progress in Massachusetts, from the singing schools of Lowell Mason to the Tanglewood Symposium and one of America's first women's music festivals, the Boston Women's Music Festival, founded in 1974. Today, our classrooms feature an array of nontraditional music learning processes and products stemming from teachers with innovative dreams and a place-based awareness of student needs. This type of nonconformist activity is built upon what Saras D. Sarasvathy refers to as **effectuation**, which is the creation of a new future based on given means and imagined ends instead of working to fit into a predictable future hinged on tradition. One such effectual thinker was iconoclastic writer, individualist, and Concord, Massachusetts, native, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862).

While most are familiar with his legacy as a naturalist, transcendental philosopher, abolitionist, and proponent of civil resistance, Thoreau was also a musician, public school teacher, entrepreneurial thinker, and education reformer. His teachings remain vital today and serve as a reminder of music education's emancipative power and its ability to provoke and cultivate the unforeseen. Further, Thoreau helped validate the importance of innovation and self-determination in life's pursuits: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours" (*Walden* 427).

Are you advancing towards your boldest teaching dreams—the very reasons you became a music educator in the first place? Even if you think you're already teaching "outside the box," consider the following lessons from Thoreau as you plot an innovative course for the future.

First, Know Yourself.

In 1845, when Thoreau left the comforts of home to live in a small cabin next to Walden Pond, his goal was not to make an environmental or political statement. Rather, he hoped to reconnect with his core values and purpose for living—to dare to think freely—by stripping away material comforts and societal expectations. As he wrote in *Walden*, "we must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep" (117). In order to be innovative educators, we must first deeply consider our values: how, why, and to whom we teach music and what we hope to accomplish in doing so. Thoreau suggests this is best accomplished in relative solitude, away from the clutter of everyday life. For him, a cabin in the woods provided respite; for music educators, perhaps a long walk, mediation session, or day when school is not in session would provide space for contemplation.

A good place to start is taking stock of the means at hand. Contrary to popular belief, innovative ideas—even game-changers like the Suzuki Method or Satis Coleman's "creative music" approach—rarely occur as "a-ha" moments. According to Sarasvathy,

research on differences between conventional (causal) thinking and unconventional (effectual) logic demonstrates that trailblazers and entrepreneurs develop their ideas by first assessing three given means: who they are, what they know, and who they know. Then, they choose an idea that connects their three given means, dive in, and embrace failure as an inevitable part of eventual success. They also collaborate. This was especially important to Thoreau, who is sometimes depicted unfairly as a recluse. Interestingly, he kept three chairs inside his "hermit's" cabin at Walden Pond: "one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society" (*Walden* 184). Thus, he sought a balance of separation and affiliation.

Next, Know Your Place.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, nonconformist approaches to music education often arise when teachers face adverse teaching conditions and need to learn to thrive with less. Thoreau's suggestion to "simplify, simplify" preceded his admonition to contemplate the wild, free, and unexpected—to improvise (*Walden* 119). Raised in a family of formally trained musicians, he preferred to improvise on flute and create what he called "unpremeditated" music as he navigated the streams and trails surrounding Concord (*Journal*, August 18, 1841). In my own research on innovative music educators, teachers working in underserved public schools exhibit higher confidence in their abilities to be professionally inventive than their counterparts in more prosperous communities. These intrepid teachers are masters of **creative innovation**, or recombination of currently-held resources, which serves as the defining element of entrepreneurialism. They achieve unexpected success by designing programs that are place-based and student-centered. Thoreau valued the same ingenuity 150 years earlier. In fact, his response to those who misunderstood his ways bespeaks creative innovation: "What you consider my disadvantage, I consider my advantage" (*Journal*, December 5, 1856).

Champions of experiential education and place-based learning owe a debt of gratitude to Thoreau. After resigning as schoolmaster of Concord's town school in 1837 over his opposition to corporal

punishment, Thoreau partnered with his brother John to establish an astonishingly progressive school, the Concord Academy. Among an array of innovations—a two-to-one student/teacher ratio, extended free play, treatment of students as learning partners—he emphasized the importance of locality in the learning process. Thoreau's students used the town of Concord as their laboratory. They visited businesses, experienced nature first-hand, and abided by the principle that students “should not play life, or study it merely... but earnestly live it from beginning to end” (*Walden*, 65). Learning was an adventure of local discoveries connecting citizen-scholars to the opportunities, resources, and sociocultural context of the place they called home.

Too often, innovative music education is narrowly equated with nontraditional ensembles or alternative styles. Thoreau teaches us that, if you really want to teach outside the box, you should facilitate learning outside the classroom. This might involve literally “taking the music to the people,” as Tom Westmoreland wrote in a previous MMEJ article, or bringing the outside in through residencies, partnerships with community musicians, intergenerational performances, and other collaborations. To dig deeper, consider the unique demographic, cultural, economic, and environmental characteristics of your school's community, and develop student-centered ways to celebrate, critique, or otherwise express them musically. Sometimes being innovative requires getting out of the way and giving students freedom to use their voices.

Finally, Use Your Voice.

“Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine” (*Resistance*). Ever the rapsca-lion, Thoreau popularized the idea of civil disobedience in response to unjust dictates from those in power. He refused to pay taxes to an American government that supported war and slavery and was jailed for it, an act of resistance that inspired Gandhi, Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. While I am not proposing a revolt against traditional schooling, I do believe the small, dauntless acts of a few can create a renewed sense of teacher-driven artistry and possibility within educational organizations.

After all, what could be more inspiring to a student than an inspired, self-determined teacher? Nobody is more attuned to the needs of your students, not to mention your own pedagogical aspirations, than you. This fact is sometimes lost today, but Concord's school committee—undoubtedly inspired by Thoreau—mandated it in their 1866 *Regulations of the Schools of Concord*: “The government of the schools is entrusted by law to the teachers.” Speak up, question tradition, and if a curricular change or new “accountability” mandate seems unjust, know that you have the right to push back peacefully while maintaining your professionalism. At the same time, seek new avenues of self-discovery that lead to more relevant, meaningful, and student-centered forms of teaching and learning. As Thoreau opined, “you must try a thousand themes before you find the right one, as nature makes a thousand acorns to get one oak” (*Journal*, September 4, 1851). Think of your teaching career as a continuous process of reinvention—the wellspring feeding what Thoreau called an “ever new self” (*Journal*, November 1, 1858).

“Now Comes Good Sailing.”

Just before his death in 1862, Thoreau uttered these final words—one last affirmation of his intrepid, self-determined spirit. He believed to the end that “the boundaries of the actual are no more fixed and rigid than the elasticity of our imaginations” (*Journal*, May 31, 1853). His name sits atop a long list of rebellious prophets who helped forged Massachusetts' status as a cradle of innovative ideas. Nonconformist, entrepreneurial educators—those who “march to the tune of a different drummer”—thrive when they keep their core values paramount, think effectually, teach with locality in mind, and use their voices in the name of justice, change, and growth. Thoreau and his contemporary Oliver Wendell Holmes once mused that “most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.”* Are you singing your song?—one of passion and professional fulfillment? If you do not like the tune and are ready to depart from convention, please know that you can change your song... or at least rewrite the lyrics.

**This oft-cited quote is typically attributed to Thoreau but in actuality draws from both Walden and Holmes' "The Voiceless."*

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Dr. Josef Hanson is an Assistant Professor of Music and Coordinator of Music Education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. In addition, he

serves as president of the Society for Arts Entrepreneurship Education (SAEE).

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