Let the Birds Sing: Comparing Public Music Education Policies and Resources in the United States and Sweden

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Section 1: Introduction and History

American society celebrates the well-rounded student. It is common for public school systems across the nation to require their students to take classes in mathematics, science, English, history and physical education. When there is enough money in the budget, electives are commonly offered in the forms of technology and the arts. Extracurricular sports programs are made available as well.

However, studies show that music is one of the best and most efficient ways of helping children develop a wide variety of skills they will benefit from throughout their lives. According to the American National Association for Music Education, some benefits include increased memory, coordination, emotional development, creativity, participation in school and self-confidence (NAfME, 2014). For these reasons, people advocate for the necessity and importance of music in a child's education, although many programs in America are cut and underfunded, sometimes in favor of STEM curricula.

Aside from the reasons described above, in general, the country of Sweden firmly believes in the importance of music education. This paper will detail the Swedish policies of music education and the municipal music schools (*kommunala musikskolan* or *kulturskolan*) in comparison to America. It will also touch on how and why these schools are representative of Sweden's democratic ideals and culture within the welfare state.

A journal article from 1948 explains that music education in Sweden began to take shape ten years before World War II began (Haren, 1948). Before this point in time, music teachers in Sweden had merely been musicians – they received formal educations in music from the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, but they never took courses about teaching itself. Being a good

musician does not automatically make one a good teacher, and this disconnect in the system left many music students *and* teachers uninspired.

The Royal Academy was founded in 1771, and the Academy members oversaw the State College of Music (Melander, 1948). This college held one of the world's largest and most complete music libraries since many works in other countries were destroyed in World War II (Melander, 1948). Especiall*y* after the war, Swedes recognized the importance of culture, and as the welfare state emerged at this time, so did big changes in music education. It was deemed that all should be able to appreciate and understand the fine arts, not just the elite.

Haren notes that this systemic change occurred when people were "anxious to give their children what they now find is a lack in their own education" (1948). Aside from changes within schools for children, music appreciation classes were offered to adults, and Swedish radio even organized educational music courses and lecture events (Haren, 1948). The government appointed the first professor in music outside the Royal Academy of Music in 1946, and practical experience in teaching became required for elementary and high school teachers (Haren, 1948). Attitudes changed, and voluntary instrumental and vocal teaching outside of compulsory classes emerged.

In the same article, Haren writes about his experience studying music education traditions in America. He summates that the aim of American music education in schools was "To develop an interest in music, to encourage children to play and sing and enjoy music" (Haren, 1948). The education was based on learning through physically playing music rather than focusing on theory, and American music educators met in committees and conferences to determine how music education enhances general education (Haren, 1948).

This American mindset towards music education was developed by educators like Calvin E. Stowe in the mid 1800s. His work inspired the Ohio state government to introduce music into their schools, as he advocated that music would aid children with all their studies, not just their musical abilities (Sanders, 2003).

At the State Teachers' Convention of 1839, Stowe proposed the following resolution: "That we regard the education of children and youth in the theory and practice of vocal music, as constituting an important part of a system of physical, mental, and moral discipline, designed to prepare them for the duties and enjoyments of life" (Sanders, 2003). He gained inspiration for this mindset from music education in Germany at the time. While this resolution is 180 years old, it is still applicable to beliefs about this subject matter in both America and Sweden. Additionally, there have been similarities in that both nations were short on music teachers in the 1940s (Melander, 1948). Nevertheless, there has been change in American music education culture over these last 180 years that differentiates the nation from Sweden.

Since the 1940s, the Swedish people have been developing a system in which music is offered in compulsory schools. They believe that music education is not a luxury, but a right. Doctor of Music Marja Heimonen writes that Swedes believe in this concept: "Music for all: let all kinds of birds sing, and not only the best ones" (2003). This was especially realized when municipal music schools began rising in popularity in the 1960s. Regardless of skill level, any child that takes interest in the arts is encouraged to participate and learn at these voluntary public arts and culture schools. As of 1978, there were 300,000 children enrolled in music classes at these schools (Tapper). Additionally, folk music was revitalized within youth culture, and underground rock scenes emerged (Tapper, 1978).

The United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* helped shape the Swedish system (Siltala, 2003), but the Swedish parliament, the Riksdag, also established a cultural policy in the 1970s. This policy aimed to grant "real freedom of expression" and "opportunity for everybody to achieve creative activity and enjoy social contacts," and it strived towards "preserving and revitalizing culture of earlier times" (Tapper, 1978).

Influenced by moderate Social Democrats, the Ministry of Education put into effect the 1969 National Curriculum for Music in Secondary Education (Tagg, 1998). This national policy recognized the importance of including popular music into music studies, as this interested and motivated young students. Pop was part of many people's lives.

The welfare state qualities of the United States and Sweden are similar in that every child has the right to a free public education – there is the belief that education makes for a better individual and a stronger society. Yet a key difference between the two systems is that Sweden specifically recognizes and prioritizes music education as a right. Nordic countries like Finland, Denmark and Norway have music schools that are governed by national legislation, but Swedish voluntary municipal music schools are governed by local governments, and funding is often determined by the condition of the economy (Heimonen, 2006).

Section 2: Current Context

In Sweden, the municipal music schools and culture schools are governed by local governments. Specifically, the Local Government Act (*Kommunallagen*) allows local governments to determine how their schools are funded (Heimonen, 2004). Pricing varies for each school, but an example is that Professor Ann Towns's two daughters attend a school for approximately $20 per semester (personal communication, June 18, 2019).

The voluntary schools offer lessons and access to instruments and equipment, and they are generally run independently by each municipality. This is largely due to the principles of economic and social equality that epitomize the Swedish welfare state, also known as *folkhemmet* (Heimonen, 2003). These schools are a great point of pride for Sweden, being listed first in an article titled "8 Reasons Why Sweden Rocks" on the official government website (2018).

According to the European Union of Music Schools, up to 92% of the music schools were financed by public subsidies in 1995 (Heimonen, 2004). In 2013, 278 of the 290 Swedish municipalities had music and arts schools (European Association for Music in Schools, n.d.). The Swedish Arts Schools Council (*Kulturskolerådet*) currently promotes that there are 283 arts schools in the 290 municipalities (n.d.). 230,000 children participate in the schools every week, and there are about 5,000 teachers across the nation (Kulturskolerådet, n.d.). On average, the cost per student per term is 643 SEK, which is equivalent to approximately $68 (Kulturskolerådet, n.d.). The students are 65% girls and 35% boys (Kulturskolerådet, n.d.).

In the 1990s, there was a national debate regarding establishing national music education policies, but it was ultimately decided that "the Swedish idea of democracy is to put into practice through local self-government and passing a music school Act is regarded as a violation of that fundamental principle" (Heimonen, 2004).

Yet on a national level, left-leaning politicians are very supportive of culture programs. For example, the Social Democrats advocate for and organize public cultural activities with the music schools (Heimonen, 2014). Gothenburg council member Daniel Bernmar is part of the Left Party, and he explained that when his coalition was in power they increased funding to public arts programs three years in a row (personal communication, June 20, 2019). However, as

right wing parties have gained power within the municipality, they have made cuts to the cultural areas of the budget – this includes cuts to the municipal music schools (Daniel Bernmar, personal communication, June 20, 2019).

In lectures with Professor Per Assmo, he explained how municipalities determine how they balance their budget. The federal government determines the compulsory tasks, which are social care and security; kindergarten, primary, secondary, and high school; environmental and health protection; cleaning and garbage; water and sewage; fire rescue; civil defense; libraries; and accommodation. Non-compulsory areas include energy, employment, business development and culture (Per Assmo, personal communication, June 13, 2019).

The music schools fall into the culture area, not the education area, and as such they are one of the first programs to receive cuts when there is a shortage of funding. This is especially prevalent with right wing parties like the Sweden Democrats. The welfare state is facing new pressures, such as the elderly living longer and there being an unbalanced population. At the moment, the system's pensions will not be enough for those that will retire in the near future, and because culture is not deemed absolutely necessary, it will get cut (Per Assmo, personal communication, June 13, 2019).

Notwithstanding, arts supporters have recently taken action on a federal level. While the idea of national music school policies was shot down in the 1990s, the Swedish Arts Schools Council has initiated the process for gaining federal funding and more unity in schools across the nation. An investigation presented in October 2016 demonstrated the obstacles young people face in gaining access to music schools in different municipalities, and the Council made it its goal "to promote a more accessible and equal high-quality cultural school in both supply and teaching" (Kulturskolerådet, 2016). A bill was passed on May 23, 2018 that gave the Council 10

million SEK to establish a national cultural school center to make their goal reality through grant distribution and data collection (Kulturskolerådet, 2016).

However, in December 2018, it was determined in the Parliamentary Exercise 2018/19: 2958, "The Liberals welcome the municipalities that prioritize low fees in the municipal cultural and music school. However, it is a municipal matter. The state grant introduced in 2016 should be abolished. Thus, expenditure on appropriations 1: 2 will be reduced by SEK 100 million" (Sveriges Riksdag, 2018). The battle for federal support for these municipal programs is constant, even when politicians proudly acknowledge the importance of cultural education for ensuring democratic ideals.

While the United States does not offer programs like Sweden's municipal music schools, there is a similar situation of the right wing working to make cultural budget cuts. On the national scale, for the third year in a row, President Donald Trump has proposed large cuts to federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in his 2020 spending plan. The organization received $155 million this year, but Trump's new proposal provides $29 million. The National Endowment for the Humanities, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Institute of Museum and Library Services would also receive major cuts (McGlone, 2019). Congress has not approved these cuts in the last two years, and even increased some of the funding for these organizations, but the threat actively exists as some politicians work to reduce cultural spending.

The NEA's work is quite commendable, but their budget is limited. In a year, $6 million of their funding went towards pre-K – 12 arts education projects, and about 40% of the grants went to programs in high-poverty neighborhoods (National Endowment for the Arts, 2017). This is a fantastic organization, but the NEA simply does not have the resources to provide all

American children with arts programs. The U.S. Department of Education reports 1.3 million public elementary school students do not have access to music education (2015). Much like Sweden, specific legislation regarding arts education ultimately lies with local governments and school districts.

For example, I attended Simonds Elementary School, a public school in San Jose. We had one music teacher with general music classes and extracurricular choir and band programs, but this was made possible through community donations. A team of parent volunteers runs the non-profit organization, the Simonds Music & Technology Foundation, which works to "continue the legacy of providing a well-rounded education to Simonds' students" (Simonds Music & Technology Foundation, n.d.). In my middle and high schools in the San Jose Unified School District, there were arts requirements for graduation, and while the students did some fundraising, funds were also provided by the schools and the district.

Section 3: Future Directions and Conclusion

America and Sweden have different public music education systems and different cultural beliefs about music. While there are similarities in regards to local regulations on programs and conservative governments reducing funding for the arts, the situations have led groups in the two nations to make plans for the future in unique ways.

As described in the last section, the Swedish Arts Schools Council is working towards creating a national curriculum for the municipal music schools. Others see these schools as unimportant and want to cut their funding. Some believe these issues should be left to the discretion of local governments. As this disagreement arises, music school supporters make the argument that music is an essential part of Sweden's economy.

Heimonen explains the popular argument that the Swedish music industry has a positive impact on Swedish export, so that justifies state support (2003). This was something that Professor Assmo talked about as well. Despite being a small nation of only 10 million people, Sweden is the third biggest export of music; in 2014, Swedes wrote 25% of the No. 1 pop songs on the American Billboard charts (Gradvall & Åkerström, 2017). When music brings so much revenue to the nation, music education is not just a means of giving people a voice and an outlet: it is a matter of making money. Kids developing musical skills benefits the economy, and those in favor of federal funding for music schools use this argument to their advantage.

Because music is valued in a different manner in America, the fight for more funding is approached differently. In many ways, the American struggle for music education is simply keeping public school programs intact and proving that the arts are just as important (if not more important) than math and science. The plan for the future seems to be raising awareness and funding through non-government organizations and foundations, and gaining as much governmental support as possible.

For example, the National Association for Music Education met with congressional politicians on Hill Day and persuaded them to include music in the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) in December 2015 (NAfME, n.d.). They are continuing to recruit teachers and parents across the nation in reaching out to politicians and advocating for music education. They provide resources on their website, including articles like “20 Important Benefits of Music In Our Schools” (2014), that explain *why* music education is so valuable. Other organizations like the VH1 Save the Music Foundation accept and distribute donations to public schools. They too participate in outreach with politicians, such as at the Annual NAMM Fly-In event for music education policy on Capitol Hill (Perry, 2017).

Both Swedish and American supporters of music education are working to raise funds, prove the importance of their programs and influence policies on a federal (rather than purely local) level. However, there were some differing cultural perspectives I personally encountered in Sweden regarding music, and while these few individuals' opinions do not reflect the entirety of the nation, I would like to discuss them in my conclusion here.

I walked into a record and instrument shop near the University of Gothenburg one day. The man working there had eighth notes and a treble clef tattooed across his right arm, and when I excitedly asked him about his experience with music education, he was completely befuddled. He thought my questions were absurd, saying, "Every Swede takes music classes unless they really don't want to." This was disproven by a 22-year-old man I talked to in a bar in Stockholm. He was visiting from the town of Finspång, and he told me he had always wanted to learn how to play a musical instrument. I did not get to talk to him long enough to determine why he had not learned previously or what resources were available to him.

It is important to note that Professor Sture Brändström wrote in a study that 54% of municipal music school students had at least one parent who played or used to play an instrument (2000). While this education is public and affordable, most of the children participating already had some form of culture and arts in their lives already.

It is additionally hard to enroll in these schools. Professor Tuba Inal has been in a queue for three years for municipal music school piano lessons for her children (personal communication, June 17, 2019). She noted that many kids participated in choirs though, and she felt that reflected the collectivist culture of Sweden. This contrasts with America and its popular music competitions in which students fiercely compete to demonstrate their own skill and value as individual musicians (Abramo, 2017).

Nevertheless, the most powerful story I heard while studying and researching in Sweden came from the teacher Sarah Korner. She talked about how wonderful she thought the municipal music schools are. She had a student at one point that was autistic and could not speak or communicate through Swedish. However, he learned how to play piano and communicated his feelings through his piano music. Because of the affordability of the music program, he was able to rent a keyboard his mother could not otherwise afford (Sarah Korner, personal communication, June 22, 2019).

Despite the differences in policy and culture, this is a large part of what makes access to music education such an important thing. It unites people and helps them grow. It reaffirms humanity. It gives a voice to those who may not otherwise be heard – and that is a beautiful aspect that is universally accepted.

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