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Portuguese Music Education Today: Policy and Curriculum

MARIA HELENA VIEIRA

Public school curricula in Portugal have traditionally been developed by a centralized political power. And on that account the history of public music education in Portugal (which is yet to be written) has been and continues to be closely linked to the history of government legislation. The Portuguese government, through its Ministry of Education, decides which curricular or extra-curricular subjects will be offered by the schools, thus indirectly defining the general structure of the teacher-training degrees offered by the universities. Through special committees, the government publishes the general outline for each subject to be taught in the elementary and secondary schools and also develops and organizes a yearly competition for teacher placement throughout the country. Although there are many private universities in Portugal that offer a great variety of degrees (many of them unique and highly reputable), the teacher-training degrees and course work outlines at these institutions generally tend to be similar to those offered by the public universities. Still in many cases there are some differences in curricular and pedagogical practices, beginning with the entry level requirements, which are generally more demanding at public universities. Most candidates who fail the public universities' entry level requirements enroll in private universities, where they then have to pay significantly higher fees. The programs have enough commonalities, however, that graduates of private universities earn diplomas that are officially recognized by the Ministry of Education, and consequently they are eligible to apply for teaching positions in the public schools.

The Portuguese system of public education has remained very centralized, despite several reforms initiated by governments of different political parties over the decades. All students in the same school year and in the same field of studies who go to a public school study uniform curricular subjects, whether they live in Lisbon, Porto, Braga, Azores, or Madeira. The only exceptions are that each school is allowed to offer a few optional extra-curricular activities. These are taken from a list of government-approved subjects.

The extremely strong influence of the successive Ministries of Education in all aspects of the Portuguese educational system in the past and the government's role in defining a general

core curriculum today (2005) cannot be overlooked. Leaving aside the benefits and the difficulties of centralized decision making for the Portuguese school curriculum, this essay will focus on the ways in which music has been and is today viewed in official legislation and programs. It will further examine the impact the government legislation and programs have had, particularly with respect to the goal of providing equal opportunities for all pupils who want to study music.

Despite the centralized policies, and unlike any other school subject, the study of music in the public educational system in Portugal takes place within three official branches: 1) vocational, 2) general, and 3) professional. The existence of these branches is rooted in the historical development of education and educational institutions, a centuries-long line that extends from an elite clientele to the general public, from the cathedrals to the conservatories, and from the public and professional schools.

Vocational Branch

The vocational branch of the Portuguese music education system includes the conservatories and official music academies. It is the oldest of the three branches. The Lisbon Conservatory was founded in 1835, and replaced the old music school of the patriarchal cathedral, thus making musical studies available to the laity and to women. The Porto Conservatory, another school with a strong legacy, opened in 1917. After that, no new conservatories appeared in Portugal for over four decades, until the 1960s.

The history of this particular branch is very complex and heterogeneous, as it encompasses both monarchy (1835–1910) and republican periods (since 1910). The almost five decades of dictatorship prior to the 1974 revolution were a particularly important time in the history of Portuguese conservatories. This was a stifling period for the arts in general (which were seen as mere vehicles for government propaganda) and an era when educational thought, reform, and legislation were neglected. Despite the creation of the Braga and Aveiro conservatories by the Gulbenkian Foundation in the 1960s, stagnation in educational policy persisted, and these vocational schools basically continued to be regulated by the same legal decrees from 1930 to 1983, despite a tentative reform in 1971.¹

For many years, conservatories were the only public music schools in the country, and their curricula ran concurrent with those of the regular, or general, schools. This resulted in a very heavy course load for music students. In my case, for instance, I enrolled in fourteen or fifteen subjects during each year of high school in the early 1980s: nine or ten were regular school subjects (such as Portuguese, English, French, history, geography, mathematics, physics, physical education, and electives) and four or five were conservatory subjects (instrumental lessons, music education, music composition, music history, and acoustics). Both the vocational and the general educational systems were open to the public and free, and independent of

¹ Decreto-Lei 18.881, de 25 de Setembro de 1930 (law that restructured the National Conservatory and defined the plans concerning music and drama teaching).

each in the nature of the contents and subjects offered. However, students in a vocational school (that is to say, a conservatory), had to enroll simultaneously in a regular high school and take all the subjects required in both systems.

In 1983, an attempt was made to integrate the vocational schools into the general school system. A rigid equivalency plan was formulated for the grade levels of both educational systems that made it possible for a student to receive a high school diploma (12th grade) from a conservatory, in the case of the two existing vocational schools with integrated curricula, or from a high school having "articulated curricula" with a conservatory. That 1983 document, however, did not address artistic education in general schools.²

Subsequent legislation in 1990 further regulated students' curricular choices: an "integrated curriculum," consisting of the music subjects and a small group of core curriculum subjects taken at the conservatory; an "articulated curriculum," where the student takes the core curriculum subjects outside the conservatory, namely at the general school; or a "supplementary curriculum," where the student takes all subjects of the curriculum at the general school and the music subjects at the conservatory.³ The emergence of the integrated and articulated curricula in the 1980s legislation was directly related to the increasing democratization of music studies, and became the government's solution to handle an increasing number of applicants to the conservatories. The extremely poor situation of music education in the general schools is partially responsible for the great number of applicants to the conservatories today. These curricular options, however, pose serious problems to the vocational or specialized nature of conservatories in terms of not only their educational goals and objectives but also of the professional identities of their teachers.⁴

The government has been aware of these problems since the enactment of the 1983 laws, which declared: "The artistic education that should be offered to everyone in the fields of music, movement and drama is not an object of this diploma, since its definition has its place in the more general scope of the study plans and study programs of the elementary and secondary teaching levels."⁵ Although the government suggested in the 1983 and the 1990 decrees that the general branch of music education needed increased attention, in reality, most documents published in the last twenty years have concerned the vocational system. Hardly any reforms have been officially introduced in the general branch; in fact, most changes there have occurred because of the surplus of vocationally qualified teachers who could not find jobs in conservatory or academy teaching and instead obtained jobs in regular schools. This situation in turn has raised specific questions that have not yet been resolved regarding teacher training and types of teacher certification.

² Decreto-Lei 310/83, de 1 de Julho de 1983 (law that regulates music, theatre, and dance teaching).

³ Decreto-Lei 344/90, de 2 de Novembro de 1990 (law that establishes the general rules for the several branches of artistic education).

⁴ R. Sousa, "O abandono no ensino especializado em Portugal" (the abandonment of specialized schools in Portugal), *Revista de Educação Musical* 117 (2003): 19–28.

⁵ Decreto-Lei 310/83, de 1 de Julho de 1983, no. 1 (law regulating music, theatre, and dance teaching).

General Branch

The general branch of music education as we see it today is rooted in the establishment of the public education system itself. After the introduction of music into the curriculum of the Universidade de Coimbra (one of the oldest universities in Europe, dating from the thirteenth century), the opening of the Jesuit schools to lay men during the sixteenth century was an important turning point for the democratization of schooling as well as for the study of the arts. During the eighteenth century, under the influence of French Illuminists, Marquês do Pombal (1699–1782, prime minister during the reign of King José, 1750–77), oversaw the expulsion of religious orders from Portugal. New schools emerged in which women could also study. Luis Antonio Verney, a Portuguese literate who studied in France, was responsible for the creation of “low schools” which were open to everyone. Their four-year curricula included music.⁶ In the course of the nineteenth century, an era that witnessed political instability and confrontation with new liberal ideas, several educational reforms were attempted. Not all of them were successful, and only some addressed music.

The turn of the twentieth century was a period of especially intense nationalist movements across Europe. In Portugal, choral singing was used as an important tool for increasing national cohesion and in 1906, music—then defined as “choral singing”—was introduced into the curriculum of the recently created *Liceu Feminino Maria Pia*, the first women’s high school in Lisbon. Music was treated as a “feminine subject,” and unlike other subjects, students’ grades were meant to be only qualitative (for example, “bad, mediocre, adequate, good, very good”)⁷ and not quantitative. In 1918 choral singing was introduced in all the other high schools in the country, and the government-produced course outlines referred to its importance for things such as “the education of the voice,” “aesthetic appreciation,” “development of the nationalistic feeling,” “moral and civic education,” and “growth of solidarity.”⁸

The *coup d’etat* of 1926 ushered in a period of dictatorship in Portugal that lasted for more than forty years. During this time, the goals previously stated for choral singing were reinforced. Although there were some reforms concerning matters such as student evaluation methods (at one point these became quantitative) and teacher training, the content of the subject of choral singing remained divorced from its musical aspects. Instead, it was closely allied to the socio-political messages conveyed by the sung texts. Choral singing, therefore, was interpreted as a form of governmental propaganda—it was a means through which to extol the glories of Portugal and to stimulate patriotic feelings.

Even though the general branch of music teaching has deep historical roots, the idea of music as an autonomous subject with its own intrinsic value that is available to every public

⁶ L. A. Verney, *Verdadeiro Método de Estudar* (Lisbon: Clássicos Sá da Costa, s.d.), 5:123–49.

⁷ M. J. C. A. Barreiros, “A Disciplina de Canto Coral no Período do Estado Novo – Contributo para a História do Ensino da Educação Musical em Portugal” (The Discipline of Choral Conducting in the Period of the “New State”—A Contribution to the History of Music Teaching in Portugal) (M.A. thesis, Universidade Nova de Lisbon – Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, 1999), 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*

school student is quite recent. Three momentous occurrences in the twentieth century led to the development of music education as an independent school subject. First, in 1968, a specific outline of coursework with specific goals and objectives for the subject of *Educação Musical* (musical education) appeared for the first time. This was part of the so-called “preparatory cycle” of secondary studies that was created for students between the ages of ten and twelve. Second, as a result of the Revolution of April 1974, which ended the period of dictatorship, a new Ministry of Education was established. This agency was responsible for the publication of music education programs for three levels: elementary, preparatory, and secondary. For the first time in Portugal, there was a coordinated general program for music education. Third, new music education programs were created in 1989 as part of a broad educational reform package (*Reforma do Sistema Educativo*).⁹ This was an inevitable response to the 1986 *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo* (Basic Law of the Educational System), where access to the arts was deemed a basic right for all Portuguese citizens.¹⁰

Outlining a complete and detailed history of music education in the Portuguese general schools must be left for another time. Here I will summarize a few general trends that have evolved. Today, music is part of the basic school curriculum at all levels of compulsory education. It is a required subject in the first and second levels (ages 6–9 and 10–11) and an elective in the third cycle (ages 12–15). It is also offered as an elective at the secondary level (ages 16–18), although secondary education is not compulsory in Portugal.¹¹

This legislation, despite its apparent consistency, is very different from its actual implementation. Curricular theory is often different from practice, regardless of discipline and even country. Most children in Portugal do not receive appropriate music training in elementary school due to the deficiency in the music background of their elementary school teachers, who are trained as generalist teachers.¹² The students’ lack of solid music training in elementary school becomes readily apparent in the second school cycle, when they encounter a specialized teacher for each subject. Music teachers for this level become very frustrated because the students’ knowledge of music is far behind their general development. In the third cycle and again in the secondary cycle, when music is an elective, the majority of students simply do not have either the motivation or an adequate background to enroll in music courses.

⁹ For more information about the introduction of Music in the Portuguese school curriculum as an autonomous subject, please refer to G. Palheiros, *Educação Musical no Ensino Preparatório – Uma Avaliação do Currículo* (Music Education in the Preparatory Cycle – Curriculum Evaluation) (Lisbon: APEM, 1993).

¹⁰ Lei nº 46/86, de 14 de Outubro de 1986. Assembleia da República. *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo* (basic law of the educational system).

¹¹ Decreto-Lei 286/89, de 29 de Agosto de 1989 (law that revokes several articles of the Lei nº 46/86 – basic law of the educational system – and restructures curriculum at basic and secondary levels).

¹² The question whether music can be effectively taught by a generalist teacher (or whether a specialist teacher is essential) is very recent in Portuguese scholarly debates, and there is not yet enough research on the topic to offer any definitive conclusions.

Professional Schools

Professional schools represent the third branch of public music education in Portugal. Historically they are the most recent, having been officially created in 1989.¹³ Their scope and place within the overall artistic educational system were defined in a 1990 law that regulated “artistic education in pre-school, in school, and outside school.”¹⁴ The function of these schools was redefined in 1993 in an attempt to equate the coursework and the level of certification of professional schools in Portugal with their European counterparts.¹⁵

Originally, the primary function of all professional schools was to prepare students for the work force in a variety of areas, including music. The need for performing musicians ran parallel to the need for electricians and accountants in a country where the government found the educational system to be exaggeratedly academic. The idea was to “strengthen the relation between school and work, as an alternative to the traditional educational system.”¹⁶ The traditional system, in most cases, was seen merely as a means to prepare students for university studies. With the new professional schools, eighteen-year-olds who might not want to pursue a university degree could graduate with a high school professional diploma that would lead them to a job in a factory, a firm, or an orchestra. The professional schools also have integrated curricula, similar to a couple of conservatories. However, they are quite different from the conservatories in the subjects offered, the heavier course load of the students, and the older student entrance age. These factors seem to contribute to the successful functioning of the professional schools as vocational schools.

Due to the recent creation of these schools, national studies on what happens to students after graduation have yet to appear. However, some general observations can be made. First, music professional schools have a high success rate. Many students receive scholarships for university-level study abroad programs, and others enter Portuguese universities. What they do not seem to achieve was the government’s goal—immediate placement of the students in professional orchestras. The level of playing required to win an audition is rare for an eighteen year old, regardless of the system in which he or she is trained. Second, the schools have a low dropout rate. Students are pleased with their experiences. Most students are highly motivated and want to pursue careers in music.

Conclusions

The coexistence of three public branches of music education in Portugal, theoretically accessible to all but targeted to different groups of students, is deeply rooted in both the history of Portuguese institutions and the evolution of educational and political goals and legislation.

¹³ Decreto-Lei 26/89, de 21 de Janeiro (law that creates Professional Schools).

¹⁴ Decreto-Lei 344/90, de 2 de Novembro (law that establishes the general rules for the several branches of artistic education).

¹⁵ Decreto-Lei 70/93, de 10 de Março (law that regulates Professional Schools and revokes law 26/89 de 21 de Janeiro).

¹⁶ Decreto-Lei 26/89, de 21 de Janeiro (law that creates Professional Schools).

Although movement away from a view of music as an educational privilege to the position that music is to be something available to all is clearly manifest in the government's increasingly intricate legislation, when it comes to the schools themselves and their practices, the reality shows different outcomes.

That there is a high dropout rate among conservatory students (whether from integrated or articulated curricula) and a low dropout rate of students in professional schools calls for investigation. Research on the topic is especially crucial because the specific identities of the individual schools within the broader educational system are at stake. The government, I would submit, also needs to pay closer attention to the interrelation between the three branches. The idea that specialized schools should work in conjunction with general schools, particularly in the early detection of music aptitudes, is only suggested in the laws. No clear legislation exists specifying how to actually implement a standard testing process across the country (for example, when and how to administer aptitude tests, who should administer them, etc.). Furthermore, teachers in the general schools lack the information they need to help students prepare to enter a conservatory or professional school.

For the majority of the population, the schematic summary presented in this essay—that is, the division of the system of public music education in three specific types of schools—exists only as governmental edicts. Even the facts that conservatories are free, public, and open to all and professional schools require only a very small fee, remain unknown to many generalist teachers and to most parents. That this situation prevails seems to stem from a sociological view of a conservatory as an elite school since, in the past, even though conservatories were public and free, only the children of rich bourgeois families actually attended them.

The music training of generalist teachers also needs to be carefully considered. The fact that generalist teachers are not able to implement the official elementary school programs in the field of music (even though they might have taken music education courses as part of the course work for their university degrees) suggests that a major part of the problem may lie in the elementary and secondary music education the teachers themselves received when they were young. This brings us back to the point that the failure of music education in general schools seems to have been feeding on itself over the past few decades in a self-perpetuating circle.

This failure seems also to be damaging the vocational nature of conservatories. Entrance to conservatories, despite entrance exams, has become mostly a matter of choice on the part of families. It does not depend on the results of a musical aptitude test given to every pupil in a public school, nor on the results of a careful selection process based on teaching and training in the public schools. Many families want the conservatories to provide a generalist music education consisting of musical literacy, singing, or learning the basics of playing an instrument. Parents are not finding these dimensions of music education in the general schools, the places, according to the government model, where they should be offered. From the vantage point of the conservatories, these courses are not part of their traditional roles, and as such, conservatory teachers are not trained to teach these less-specialized subjects.

This migration of general students to the conservatories is perhaps related to the phenomenon that students who in the past may have chosen conservatories are now enrolling in

professional schools. If this is the case it may broadly help explain the failure of conservatories and some of the success of professional schools. All in all, generalist music education needs to be a top priority for research and curricular development and policy in Portugal. The tripartite division of music education, I would maintain, also needs to be carefully considered and reevaluated based on data obtained over the last twenty years—how do the different configurations relate to each other today, both in theory and in practice? By waiting to address or by not addressing these fundamental issues, current practice may lose all ties with Portugal's rich heritage of music education.

APPENDIX

List of Legislative Documents Mentioned in the Text

- Decreto-Lei 18.881, de 25 de Setembro de 1930 (law that restructured the National Conservatory and defined the plans concerning music and drama teaching).
- Decreto-Lei 310/83, de 1 de Julho de 1983 (law that regulates music, theatre, and dance teaching).
- Lei nº 46/86, de 14 de Outubro de 1986 Assembleia da República. *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo*. (basic law of the educational system).
- Decreto-Lei 26/89, de 21 de Janeiro de 1989 (law that creates Professional Schools).
- Decreto-Lei 286/89, de 29 de Agosto de 1989 (law that revokes several articles of the Lei nº 46/86 – basic law of the educational system – and restructures curriculum at basic and secondary levels).
- Decreto-Lei 344/90, de 2 de Novembro de 1990 (law that establishes the general rules for the several branches of artistic education.)
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ON BUNKER'S HILL

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J. Bunker Clark

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PORTRAIT OF J. BUNKER CLARK

Courtesy of Mary Tuven

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