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ARTICLE

Satis N. Coleman: Progressive Music Education’s Unseen Foundation

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Introduction

Progressive music educator Satis Narrona Coleman, née Barton (1878-1961) was born in Tyler, Texas. After graduating from the Graduate Tyler High School in 1894, she attended the Sam Houston Normal Institute in Huntsville, Texas, where she met Professor Waler Moore Coleman (1863-1926). The two married on March 13th, 1896 and had two sons, Charles (born 1900) and Walter Jr. (born 1907). The family lived in Europe for a time; Walter researched biology in Berlin and London, while Satis studied voice. Their relationship dissolved between 1910-1911 when Satis moved to Washington D.C. and Walter remained in Europe.

Satis Coleman (henceforth referred to as Coleman) received diplomas from the Wrightson School of Singing in 1917 and the Washington College of Music in 1916 (unconfirmed, Southcott, 2009). Also in 1917, Coleman published her first article entitled “Children and Music – A Heretic’s Views on the Present System of Teaching.” As a self-proclaimed heretic of traditional music education methods, Coleman incorporated dancing, instrument building, spirituality, creativity, and world music into her teaching, and drove her students to develop a “seeking attitude” through their training (Southcott, 2009).

Coleman moved to New York in 1918 and began teaching at The Lincoln School at Columbia University Teachers’ College in 1919, where she remained until her retirement in 1942 (Volk, 1996). Her influence can be seen in the methodology of countless educators, most notably Robert W. Claiborne (1888-1966; Hanson, 2019). Her impact on the past century of music education was substantial, yet many music educators are unaware of her influences in the field. This article will help to illuminate Coleman’s significant contributions to the profession.

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Sound Before Sight

"Does not a child learn to speak his language before he learns to read it, and shall he not say musical things, with his fingers as well as with his voice, before he reads them?" (Coleman, 1922, p. 16).

The concept of "sound before sight" highlights the idea that students most effectively learn music that is already aurally established within their head, rather than learning notation first. This methodology is often attributed to pedagogues Shinichi Suzuki and/or Zoltán Kodály (Oare, 2011), however, this concept was one of the primary inspirations behind Coleman's teaching. Coleman recalled her first piano lesson as being discouraging; she was excited to learn to "make a tune that sounded pretty," (1922, p. 14) yet her teacher only harped upon the unfamiliar symbols written in the music book. Coleman stated that her "only incentive and comfort lay in the hope that, finally, music would come out of all this mental strain and nervous tension" (1922, p. 15).

Coleman's work with children further validated her experience years later, as she witnessed gratifying success in teaching by rote and cipher notation (commonly referred to as numbered musical notation). For example, in her work The Marimba Book, Coleman provided teachers and students instructions for making their own barred percussion instruments, discussed their cultural history, and led them in playing simple, familiar tunes. The Marimba Book has images of both cipher notation and traditional notation (see figures 1 and 2) to be used depending on the individual student's comfort and skill. This book is one in a series meant to aid students of a variety of ages and ability levels (1926). This concept of sound before sight paired with instrument building was the basis of Coleman's "Creative Music" program.

Creative Music

"Of all arts music is the most spontaneous, and in that very quality lies much of its power" (Coleman, 1922, p. 168).

As an instructor at The Lincoln School, Coleman developed an experimental course that would eventually be titled "Creative Music" by another teacher at the college (incidentally, a name that Coleman disliked, but stuck regardless; Volk, 1996). Through this program, Coleman guided students in creative improvisation using "primitive" instruments that the children made. The instrument making progressed through three main categories: percussion (including kettle drums, tabors, barrel drums, Chinese gongs, marimbas, glasses, and vibrating rods), wind (including pipes of Pan, fifes, shepherd's pipes, flutes, and ocarinas) and stringed instruments (including hunter's bows, harps, lyres, and lutes; Coleman, 1922).

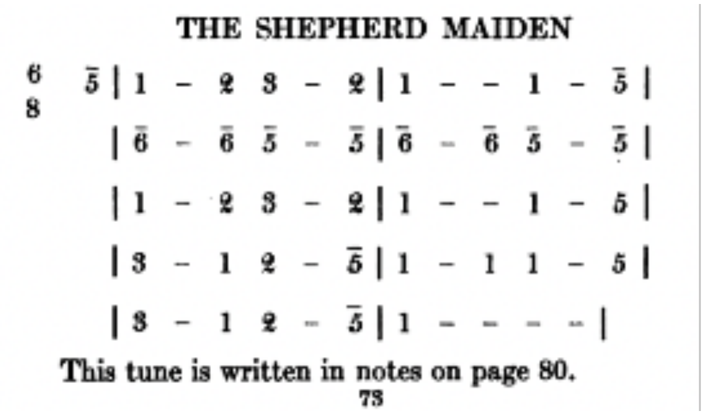


Figure 1. Coleman, 1926, p. 73

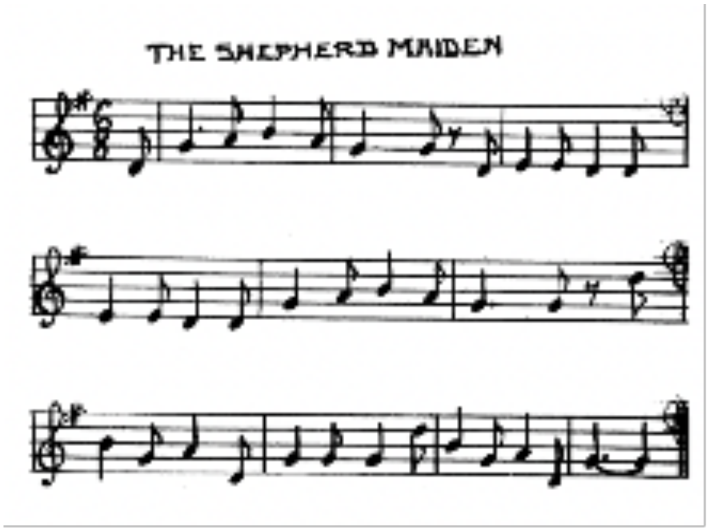


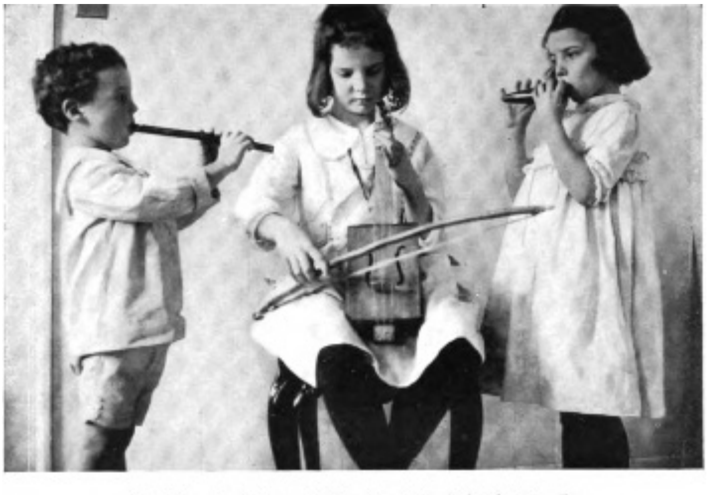
Figure 2. Coleman, 1926, p. 80

Coleman often referred to folk music and music of ancient cultures as "primitive", a term which may now be considered condescending. In 1922, Coleman described her thought process for her Creative Music program in the following manner:

> They shall build up their own art and experience the development of music from the beginning," I said to myself. "Being little savages, they can understand savage music. I shall find the child's own savage level, and lift him gradually up to higher forms; and he shall understand each stage as he reaches it, for his power will grow with it, and his work will always be at his own level. The natural evolution of music shall be my guide in leading the child from the simple to the complex; and we, with guidance, may probably often discover and cover in one lesson things that required generations for man, without guidance, to learn. Primitive man made his own instruments, and so shall we make many of ours, too! (p. 29)

Although the specific language may now be inappropriate, Coleman's reasoning behind the program was ahead of its time. The Creative Music process reflected the popular educational practice of scaffolding, in which instructors build upon students' prior knowledge and provide them with appropriate challenges throughout the learning process, a practice that was not officially conceptualized until the 1970s (Van de Pol et al., 2010).

Additionally, Coleman's progressive philosophy for the Creative Music program incorporated visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for children to view to Crosby-Brown Collective of musical instruments. She led her students in discussions about the collection of instruments: the designs they exhibited, the cultures that utilized them, and the sound of the music they created (Volk, 1996). This practice provided students with context, inspiration, and a more holistic view of how all humans can create music.



36. The Beginnings of Chamber Music in the Family

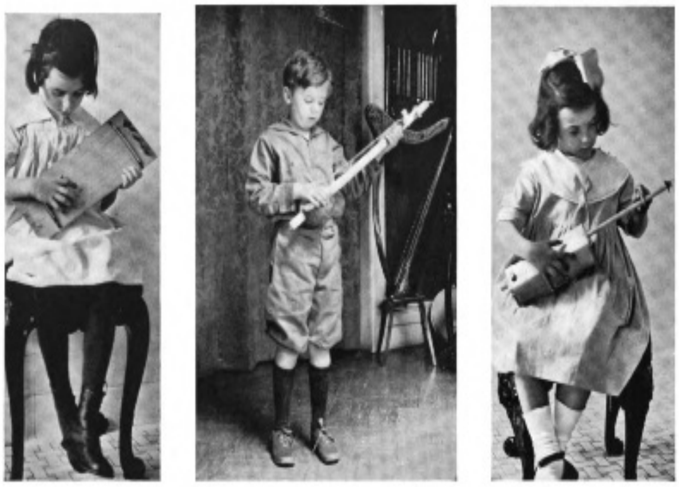
Figure 3. Coleman, 1922, p. 179

The Seeking Attitude

"[T]he child's attitude toward music and music study is the powerful pulling of pushing force that will either build or thwart his musical development" (Coleman, 1939, p. 15).

Coleman strove to create a "seeking attitude" in her students, or a yearning for experience. It is, as Coleman described, "the action of a dynamic force which drives the individual toward further discovery, and toward more use of what is already discovered; which urges him forward toward greater skill in the field, and more use of the skills he has acquired" (1939, p. 16). In this same work, Coleman referenced John Dewey's Interest and Effort in Education: "If interest is elsewhere, no amount of driving can bring a vital music experience to the child, and nothing really educates except experiences that are vital, with an internal drive to put forth mental or physical effort – a sincere wish to do something about it" (p. 16).

In order to inspire this "seeking attitude", Coleman allowed her students the freedom to explore through teacher-guided, yet self-instructed learning. Through the Creative Music course, students were able to discover the sounds of common objects as well as their hand-made instruments. This discovery happened at the individual student's own pace and allowed students to gain musical experiences that would lead to the desire for musical knowledge (Southcott, 2009). As Coleman wrote, "the best learning is that which cultivates and refines one's emotions, and you can't reach a child's emotions through a page of printed signs. He must feel something first" (1917, p. 50). This philosophy links directly to her own negative experiences as a young piano student; Coleman yearned to equip her students with the drive and passion to learn music in a way that genuinely interested them.



29. A Modern Kin of the

30. Barney Tries His New Cocoanut Banjo

31. The Use of the Movable

Figure 4. Coleman, 1922, p. 149

A Spiritual Influence

"The creation of art is one of those processes which help us to perceive the Divine Mystery, and partially to comprehend it" (Coleman, 1939, pp. 7-8).

Coleman's connection between music education and spirituality have been coded into five themes by researcher Daniel J. Shevock (2015): a distinctive view of God, living simply, wholesome humility, emotions, and silence in nature. Shevock cited Parker Palmer's definition of spirituality in teaching as "the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos" (2003, p. 377) and likened this definition to Coleman's own teaching philosophy: "Musical training has extraordinary educational value, but so long as we are interested in music as an accomplishment only, and so long as the motivating power behind musical study is the wish to impress others, we shall never realize its greatest value" (1922, p. 9).

Coleman's distinctive spiritual philosophy was one of open-mindedness and inclusivity. According to Shevock, Coleman did not define the specific deity she often referenced, and "she was as likely to reference a Native American religion as Martin Luther" (2015, p. 58). Although her own religious beliefs were never classified by a certain sect, "Coleman stipulated that music could be regarded as a way to know God beyond reason" (Shevock, 2015, p. 58). It seems as though Coleman approached the connection between music and spirituality as a way to encourage altruism amongst society, and communicate with the celestial unknown.

The latter four themes of Shevock's 2015 research into Coleman's spirituality can be interpreted as not only her sacred values, but guides for her lifestyle and educational practice. Coleman encouraged students pursue interests that brought them happiness but reasoned against an overcrowded schedule of extra-curricular activities, lest the appreciation of their passion (music or otherwise) be hindered. This simplicity can be partnered with the benefits of appreciating silence in nature. Coleman believed that the music of the natural world lived within that silence:

> Many people go through life deaf to some of the most beautiful sounds in Nature. They walk in the woods and never hear the soft crunch of their feet on the dry leaves, the whirr of the bird that flies overhead, or even the song which the bird sings when he alights in the tree. They never think to listen to the wind blowing through the branches or notice the musical babble of the stream rushing over the stones. And that delightful little time-beater of the evening, the cricket under the leaves — all this rare music is missed, probably because the traveler was never taught, as a little child, to listen for these things and to love Nature with his ears as well as with his other senses (1939, p. 95).

In regard to the concept of humility, Coleman stated that when the elements of testing and competition are removed from the music education environment, "great talent is usually found in a person of unaffected and humble nature" (1939, p. 31). Shevock connected Coleman's philosophy of humility with students' emotions. Due to the power music holds over children's emotional responses, it is imperative that educators select repertoire that guides students in a positive direction. According to Shevock, Coleman believed that students should be encouraged to find joy in their performance, even if there is no audience. This idea would ideally help curb the potential to "misuse a child's natural emotions towards music to inculcate a habit of showing off" (2015, p. 59).

Conclusion

Satis Coleman's self-proclaimed "heretical" thinking was professionally ground-breaking. The progressive philosophies Coleman incorporated into her teaching – sound before sight, creativity, improvisation, student-driven learning, scaffolding, cross-curricular learning, spiritual connection, emotional regulation, and more – are embedded throughout the various methodologies of both general and music education.

Coleman was posthumously inducted into the Music Educators Hall of Fame in 2010. According to MENC TODAY, she was recognized for "her work with young children, her publications, and her early interests in creativity. She promoted music education for its ability to lead children to relate music to other subjects, such as history and geography" (2010, p. 9). Although her work is unfamiliar to many of today's music educators, Coleman's contributions to the profession were significant.

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